

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Tuesday, January 17, 2023

COMMITTEE ROOM

Overview: Last Post Fund

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Chris Palmer (Chair)

Danielle Barkhouse (Vice Chair)

Larry Harrison

Tom Taggart

Nolan Young

Hon. Ben Jessome

Hon. Tony Ince

Gary Burrill

Lisa Lachance

[Hon. Tony Ince was replaced by Hon. Kelly Regan.]

[Tom Taggart was replaced by Kent Smith.]

In Attendance:

Kim Leadley
Acting Legislative Committee Clerk

Erin Fowler
Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Last Post Fund

Robert Carter, President

Steve St. Amant, Vice President and Lieutenant Commander



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2023

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

2:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Chris Palmer

VICE CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Welcome, everybody.

My name is Chris Palmer, the MLA for Kings West and Chair of this committee. I'd just like to take a minute and let everyone know I've had laryngitis since December 17th. Please allow me to be able to speak maybe not as loudly as I usually do. Bear with me and my voice this afternoon.

I want to thank the Vice Chair, MLA Barkhouse, for filling in for me in the last meeting as I was dealing with some illness. Thank you very much.

Again, welcome, everybody.

Today we'll hear from presenters regarding an overview of the Last Post Fund. I'd like to ask all committee members at this point to please turn off your phones or put them on silent. In the case of an emergency, please use the Granville Street exit and walk up to the Grand Parade.

I'll now ask committee members, starting on my left with MLA Barkhouse, to please introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. I'd also like to note the presence of Legislative Counsel, Erin Fowler, to my right, and Acting Legislative Committee Clerk, Kim Leadley, to my left.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses this afternoon. Welcome to our committee. At this point, I'd like to ask you to introduce yourselves. Where there are only two of you this afternoon, we might as well allow you to introduce yourselves, and if you have an opening statement, you can give it right away.

Mr. Carter, maybe we'll begin with you.

ROBERT CARTER: My name is Robert Carter. You can call me Bob. I go by Bob most of the time. I am the president of the Last Post Fund for the Nova Scotia branch. To my left is Steve St. Amant, who is the vice president. He is retired military, as you can tell by the large number of medals on his left chest.

We're here to talk about the Last Post Fund. I can begin, if the Chair wishes.

THE CHAIR: Yes, please - an opening statement.

ROBERT CARTER: The Last Post Fund has been around since 1909. We traditionally provided funeral and burial services for veterans who were not themselves in a position to pay. That really was pretty much our operation for a number of years. Over the last number of years, we've developed special initiatives.

I know there's a lot of material that's been provided to you in advance, and I appreciate the clerk's work. She did a great job putting all that together. I'll also say that the clerk was great in terms of explaining this process to me. I'd never appeared before a committee, so I found it much easier coming in knowing what I was going to face versus not knowing.

In recent years, we've had some other initiatives dealing with Indigenous veterans, a lot of whom did not have proper funerals and burials. In fact, they did not have many services available to them at all after they returned from overseas or retired from the military. We put a special effort into acknowledging them, and we now have programs that will allow them to have a grave marker in their own native language with whatever native symbols they would prefer. We have made a point of going around and putting those in place and working with Indigenous leaders for that purpose.

We have a Lost Veterans Initiative, which is designed to track down veterans in unmarked graves. We have an Unmarked Grave Program that Steve is heavily involved in and has been involved in going back to his time when he was serving in England. In that

case, what we're trying to do is, a lot of veterans when they came back, came back impoverished and did not have access to resources. The family didn't have resources, or they may not have had any contact with their families, and they were buried without any grave marker or any acknowledgement. There may have been a wooden stake or maybe a wooden cross, but nothing more than that - and that rots over time.

We have volunteer researchers across the country, including here in Nova Scotia, who are researching - what we call "lost veterans" - these unmarked graves to be sure that they have a proper marker and a proper funeral. Usually, members from the military will get involved. It's been very, very helpful. It's acknowledging these people who were simply not acknowledged when they returned. Canada's got a lot of great history, but our treatment of veterans after the conflicts overseas has not been great.

Since 2014, we have been involved with what we refer to as modern-day veterans. That would be Afghanistan, the Gulf Wars, and then other conflicts, peacekeepers. Anybody who has served in the military for even a day is qualified under the program, as long as they've been honourably discharged. Basically you have to get through basic training and work, and then you qualify. A lot of the modern veterans have resources, but not everyone does. There are a few things that we're trying to do, and we're hoping your committee and you as individual members can help us.

First and foremost is awareness. We still get cases of people who don't hear about us until after the fact - boy, that would have been great if they were available, but I didn't know. We try to get out to funeral homes. We try to get out to the Legions. As you all probably know, the Legions are not as plentiful as they used to be. A lot of the rural Legions are pretty small, so it's hard getting our awareness out. We don't have a budget to run a big social media campaign or TV ads or billboards or anything like that. We're just trying to spread awareness wherever we can so people know about us.

That's number one. There are a few other things, though, that are within the provincial boundary, but others that are a little more national that we want to highlight.

In terms of at the provincial level, one of the things that we're faced with right now is Fort Massey Cemetery. It's one of only two in Canada that's owned by Veterans Affairs. There are a lot of unmarked graves over there. What's the number again?

STEVE ST. AMANT: Approximately 750.

ROBERT CARTER: A lot of them have been identified. We know who's there, but it's owned by Veterans Affairs, and it's not really getting a whole lot of attention. We've tried various things over the years in terms of getting an individual memorial there or getting some type of - not quite a cenotaph, but some type of acknowledgement that there are all these veterans there. It's been really hard. If any of you have any contacts at the

federal level, or ever have an opportunity to influence the federal level, that would be one thing.

It also raises an issue that is going on. Of course, some of you are probably aware of it in your own constituencies, which is cemeteries that are not being managed. There's no upkeep anymore. There are a lot of cemeteries that were owned and run by churches, but the church has folded and there's no one locally doing it anymore. They fall back to, I believe, the municipality and/or the Province, but no one does anything.

There's one in particular in Cape Breton that I'm dealing with at the moment where storm erosion has meant that there are coffins and burials falling out of the side of the hill and onto the beach below. I've been speaking with Kendra Coombes, the MLA in that area. She's aware of it. I'm going down in a couple of weeks for part of my day job - I have a court appearance down there - so I'm going down while I'm there. A Legion member is going to take me out and show me, because there are veterans who are now on the cusp of falling into the sea.

Even if it's not a veteran, it's a shame that we have cemeteries there that have been abandoned, and we now have bodies falling into the ocean. I just think as someone who has lived in Nova Scotia almost my entire life, I find that just depressing and disappointing. Surely to goodness, it can be addressed.

The other thing that we'd like to put a bug in your ear about is vital statistics. When we're doing research on unmarked graves, we can get older death certificates, but there's a cost for every single one. We're run by a volunteer organization, so you've got volunteers doing their searching, and every time they want to get a death certificate or a marriage certificate or a birth certificate that's 50, 60 years old, there's a cost.

If there was some way that we could get either a flat rate or get a special rate or something that would allow us to be able to do it - this is not done for personal genealogical research. This is not going on Ancestry.com for someone's individual person. This is us trying to determine an unmarked veteran's grave, but there's an expense, and we don't have the budget for that. This is all volunteers, and we certainly can't ask them to pony up their own money for that. That is something that we just wanted to put a bug in this committee's ear about, because it is a veterans' issue from our perspective.

The other thing - and again, this is not within the authority of this committee, but you can have potentially some influence at the federal level. The Funeral and Burial Program sets a fixed amount that funeral homes get paid. That amount hasn't changed for years. Right now, it's \$7,376. Anybody who's buried a relative in the last few years would know that's really a low end of what the cost would be. The federal government sets the rates through Veterans Affairs, and that rate hasn't changed for years. Any influence you guys might have with federal counterparts, even if it's just at a party conference over a cup of coffee - some way to try to put the bug in their ear that this is really too low of a rate.

The other thing that we've been really lobbying Veterans Affairs hard on is that there's a one-year limitation under the program. A family has to come to the program within the first year after death. If they're after the first year, our hands are tied. Having gone through the death of close family members, there are months of grieving. You're trying to deal with the estate. You've done the funeral, but by the time you circle back to this, if you haven't heard about it right away and you hear about it a year and a half later, it's too late. We have families who have funded funerals and burials that could really have used our help, but they've come too late.

We've been trying really hard on a national level to get that extended. In our view, three years seems like a reasonable extension. That gives families time to go through the grieving process, through the estate process, sort out all of that, and still have time. It's basically just saving money off the backs of grieving families, as far as I can tell, because it's the same pot of money - whether they come in one year or three years. This is a small pittance of the federal budget. Again, any influence you may have at your level - individually or as a committee - would be really appreciated. That's something that to us is really a shame.

We have a number of fields of honour in Nova Scotia, but the main one is over in Fairview Lawn Cemetery, just down from the Titanic graves, if you're ever over at the Titanic graves. In the last year or so, we've been working with the city on getting that all up and running. We have a new flagpole - we're getting that spruced up. We're getting signs put up so that people who are here to see the Titanic will see signs pointing them to our field of honour. If you're not really a Titanic fan, maybe you'll want to go over and take a look at our field of honour. That's going on.

I've talked too long. I'm happy to answer questions. Between Steve and I, we will answer your questions as best we can. If we don't have an answer, we'll get you an answer, and if there's anything you need afterward, just reach out. We're both more than happy to help in any way possible. If you have constituents who have questions about the program, we can make sure they get steered in the right direction and go from there. Thank you for your time.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant, you're good for an opening statement?

STEVE ST. AMANT: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: We will begin our question and answer period. As the standard operating procedure of our committee, it's by show of hands - I'll recognize each MLA with their question for you. I do ask that you wait to be recognized before you begin to speak. Also, we will continue our questioning until probably 3:45 p.m. At that point, we will suspend question and answer for the committee to do business after that.

We'll begin questioning. I see MLA Barkhouse, you have the first question this afternoon.

[2:15 p.m.]

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Are we allowed to have a follow-up if it pertains to the question?

THE CHAIR: Yes, I will allow for a quick followup if it is in relation to the previous question asked.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Perfect. Technically, I'm getting away with three questions now.

THE CHAIR: I'll keep my eye on that.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Can you tell us a bit about how the Indigenous Veterans Initiative started? I'd like to know a little bit about that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: In 2019, we actually kicked off the Indigenous Veterans Initiative here in Nova Scotia. We had a very good meeting with the Mi'kmaw elders over in Dartmouth and we passed on that program. It's kind of a branch of the Unmarked Grave Program - the difference being is that if the family requests it, they can have one of the seven sacred symbols put on the marker vice the Latin cross, which is kind of our standard, and they can have their name in their native language put on the marker. So we've done that.

As you can well imagine, it's more of a popular program out west than it is here. Unfortunately, in Nova Scotia we've only had one marker taken up on that. We would love to see more. But it's a question of finding these veterans.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I can add one thing to that. About a year and a half ago, we added a member to our branch who is Indigenous. She's made some efforts to get us meeting with Indigenous leaders. That's been helpful. Steve and I, and another one of our branch members, were at a powwow in Dartmouth last Summer. We had a booth set up and we had an opportunity to meet with a lot of Indigenous people who didn't know about us - had never heard of us - so it was an opportunity.

Again, it's that awareness program. It's just a matter of getting out the awareness.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: That leads me to ask what the reaction and feedback has been from the Indigenous community so far, since they've found out about it and since you've started this. Either of you - Bob or Mr. St. Amant.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: We actually attended the powwow here in Dartmouth this past Summer. That went very well. We were getting very good feedback and getting the awareness out.

Unfortunately, in one situation in Bridgewater, there is an Indigenous veteran buried beyond the perimeter of the Catholic cemetery. He's down a hill. We would love to get him a marker, but in the end, the family said they don't want that. We respect that decision.

That's one of the things we find difficult here. Suicides weren't treated very well in certain capacities, and people buried beyond that - trying to find those people can be very problematic.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: My question is going to be around eligibility, assuming that there are some who are not eligible for the program itself. Are you looking into ways to expand the eligibility criteria? If so, what would that look like?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I can start off. Steve would have more of the specifics because he's been involved with some of them.

Ideally, we'd like to expand it. Right now, there is a means test. If you have a certain income, if you have certain assets - now, we take out the home. It's not considered part of your assets. We truly try to make an effort to count as little as possible toward the assets.

Ideally, we would like to expand that number. Is it \$42,000?

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: \$40,000 is the current threshold right now.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: Ideally, we would like to expand that to a higher number. I mean, \$40,000 can be achieved pretty quickly, but that doesn't mean the family's got oodles of money to afford a funeral and burial at current prices - especially with inflation and everything else. Ideally, we'd like to get that increased.

Again, it's Veterans Affairs Canada who tell us what the threshold is. We can ask - and we ask every year when we go to budget time - if we can increase the threshold. The best they'll do is - it's gone up a little bit on cost of living, but not substantively and not with inflation over the past year and a half or so. That's not accounted for in this. Ideally, we'd like to raise that so that it becomes more available for people.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: If I might add, our basic five-year trend right now is that we're averaging approximately 117 veterans a year in Nova Scotia who are recipients of the Funeral and Burial Program - 72 is the average for those who are not accepted. With regard to the Unmarked Grave Program, we're providing approximately 17 to 20 markers per year for unmarked graves. That gives you about a five-year trend.

It's declining or trending down at the moment. Second World War veterans are passing on at a faster rate, so we're definitely on a bit of a downhill slope at the moment, but we still have a considerable number of modern-day vets who will cater with these services as well.

THE CHAIR: I have MLA Young, and then MLA Regan after that.

NOLAN YOUNG: I noticed in your annual report, you had six objectives that your organization was focusing on. One of them was awareness, and you mentioned awareness earlier. I'm just wondering what you're currently doing to promote your services, and also how you see this evolving.

ROBERT CARTER: Awareness really is just feet on the ground, spreading the word anywhere we are. If a branch member is anywhere, they will talk about the Last Post Fund. I have a briefcase I carry with me for work, and I have in there a ton of Last Post Fund pins. I could be out anywhere, and I just give someone a pin and talk about the Last Post Fund.

Steve and I met back in September with the provincial Legion executive for Nova Scotia Nunavut Command. We went through the program and answered their questions. We've had follow-up with a number of Legions around the province. One of our past presidents met with the service officer at the provincial level. I have met with some individual Legion members and branches as I travel the province for work.

That's really all we can do at this point because we don't have a budget for advertising. We have one member under 40. Everyone else is our age and up, so social media awareness - no one is finding our social media accounts. I speak for myself and probably Steve, and everyone else in the branch. It's really just word to word, mouth to mouth, just on the street, see somebody and talk about it.

Again, I've got Last Post Fund stuff all over my office. If anybody comes in, I'll give them something, but it's that level. It's that on the ground, so to speak.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just a quick follow-up. Do you have any suggestions on how we can raise awareness of the programs to our local veterans?

STEVE ST. AMANT: Absolutely. I know you generally put out an MLA bulletin that talks about what you're doing in your particular ridings. A mention of the Last Post Fund and our programs - e.g. the Funeral and Burial Program, Unmarked Graves Program, and the Indigenous Veterans Initiative - would be a welcome addition to one of our bulletins, maybe on a yearly cycle if that was possible. That would be a very significant help.

We would also like to recruit someone with a PR background to assist us with those kinds of efforts. We're looking into that. We're hoping we can do that in the near future.

THE CHAIR: MLA Regan.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Can family members be buried with a veteran if they are, in fact, using the Last Post Fund?

ROBERT CARTER: Traditionally it wasn't, but in recent years we've been allowing that. The National Field of Honour in Quebec has a number of burial sites as well as columbarium. They've been opening it up to family members in the last year or so. When I was there in June, I got a tour and they showed me a number of sites where there are multiple family members - husband, wife and daughter or son - and so we've really tried to allow that.

I don't think it's something that's broadcast really loudly. There haven't been a lot of requests over the years for that. When I was at the national meetings in June it was being discussed, and we were opening it up that way.

KELLY REGAN: I was thinking, boy, I should be sharing this on my social media and in my next e-newsletter, et cetera. I can guarantee that I will do that. MLA Jessome and I will take this back to our caucus to let people know that they can share that too. We're always looking for things that will help our constituents. Here in Nova Scotia, we have a lot of veterans - there's no two ways about it.

You mentioned the \$7,000 cap. Just to give you some context - here in Nova Scotia, the Department of Community Services will pay for funerals of people who do not have any money. Last time I checked, when I was minister, it was capped at \$3,800 - just to give you an idea. Is it up now? It's now \$4,000, is it? Anyway, it's considerably less, so I'm glad to hear that it is where it is. Although I certainly understand that, as with everything else, inflation has affected the cost of that.

I don't really have a question about that, but perhaps you could let us know what you're looking for.

ROBERT CARTER: I appreciate that. I'm aware that the Department of Community Services level is much lower than what we allow. I have two comments on that. Just because Community Services is too low doesn't necessarily mean that ours is too high. I spent my entire life avoiding politics, so I'm not going to weigh in one way or another on that issue, as to where responsibility lies. I would say, though, that we would like to see that up closer to \$10,000.

What I would say too is veterans deserve a proper funeral. I mean, I can get it that we'd like to give everybody a proper funeral and sure, that would be an ideal world, and we'd give everybody a \$10,000 funeral. But veterans put their lives on the line. Some of these people were in war zones - men and women putting their lives on the line, getting shot at. Surely to goodness, somewhere in this country we can find the money to give them a proper burial if the family can't afford it.

Even if they didn't serve in a war zone - because I get that argument all the time: Well, I'm not really a veteran because I didn't serve overseas. B.S. is my response. If you signed up and said, I'm prepared to go overseas and get shot at - if you ask me, you're a veteran. That's it. There's no distinction between the two. These men and women deserve to have a proper funeral and burial, and get recognized for that. In the world of things we can spend money on, this one seems to me to be proper.

STEVE ST. AMANT: I would like to clarify something too. A lot of people have the misconception in the province that a veteran is only someone who served in the First World War, Second World War or Korea. That is absolutely not the case. For our purposes, a veteran is a veteran is a veteran. You served, you are eligible to qualify - and then going through that process will determine eligibility after a while. Someone might have finished basic training and left the military. They can apply for Last Post Fund benefits if the state wishes to do that.

That's one thing I'd really like to make clear: what constitutes a veteran is considerably different than what we've seen in the past.

THE CHAIR: Thank you both for that passionate reminder of the people we are here to serve and advocate for.

MLA Burrill.

[2:30 p.m.]

GARY BURRILL: First, we appreciate your patience with the background noise. There's nothing we can do about it. (Laughter) I was going to say in our committee group this afternoon, between Rev. Harrison and myself, we would have a lot of experience with the burials of veterans in rural communities.

One thing about burials in rural communities is that the clergyperson tends to be a little bit closer to the arrangements than is the case in other places. In other words, you tend to help people with the forms. Sometimes you help people with figuring out accessing things to do with money. So I'm actually pretty familiar with the Last Post Fund application process, and I can almost tell you, where I've served, those applications that were successful and those that weren't.

I've often had a lingering question about it in my mind, rooted in the fact that - I'm speaking about Second World War veterans - some of our Second World War veterans' families who have not - whose applications for Last Post Fund assistance have not been successful have been families where you would have expected that they would be, where you would have expected that they actually had less than other families who were successful. In looking into that, I discovered that it had to do with the definition of the threshold with the asset of land.

It is very common in rural Nova Scotia that people of long-term intergenerational low income own land. This is a feature. I have found, with the Last Post Fund, that there have been people who have been turned down in ways that have not been good - that have not created a good feeling in the local Legion. People know about it. It's a small community. It had to do with this business of owning land, and how that defined the assets that people had.

I wonder if this is a problem that you've encountered, and if you have any thoughts about how it might be addressed.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I have heard that before. It goes back to what Veterans Affairs Canada will allow and not allow. If I had to hazard a guess - and this is just my perception - in Ontario, Quebec, west, you don't have that type of long intergenerational land ownership. Farms, maybe, but they're only going back to the 20th century, generally. Whereas we will have in rural Nova Scotia - all of you would have constituents who are living on land that's been in the family for 200 years.

It's not as much of an issue in the other parts of the country as it is here, so it doesn't get the attention that it gets. I have heard that though, and people who otherwise have little means but happen to own a big tract of land that really is not going to sell - I mean, they're not going to sell the family homestead at this point, but it still gets qualified. I've heard that.

It's part of the eligibility dynamics and discussions we have with Veterans Affairs all the time - about what should be and shouldn't be. If I had to hazard a guess - maybe I'm just paranoid and suspicious living down in this neck of the woods - it's that there's more pull from Veterans Affairs Canada from people in Ontario west who don't have this type of issue. The matrimonial homes in Ontario are generally way more valuable - especially if you live in the GTA - so when they exclude that, that can immediately put people into eligibility.

It's a good point, and again, one that we will certainly have conversations with Veterans Affairs Canada about.

GARY BURRILL: It might sound like a kind of a peripheral point - a way in which assets are defined and so on. But in a rural community and in a rural Legion, where you would have, perhaps - well, now not so many, but let's say 15 years ago - three or four Second World War veterans pass away in the course of a year, this kind of inconsistency harms the reputation of the fund. People tend to know about it. So I think it's not an arcane or peripheral matter. I'm glad that you have that same feeling - that it is something where it might be important for us to get our oar in on.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: Can I ask a question in relation to that? The land ownership, is it a parcel of land in addition to the place they live on or is the land encompassed with the PID - you know, like the PID would have their home? Because if the land is external to where they are living, that's an asset.

GARY BURRILL: Something similar is dealt with in housing grants in Nova Scotia, where you have to be below a certain threshold in order to access the grant. But these are for grants for people who own homes - so small income in the context of home ownership. The rule that's applied there in Nova Scotia housing programs is if the assistance is extended to you and you convert that asset - in other words, if you sell that house - then that grant is repayable.

But in the cases that I'm talking about, I'm talking about a family homestead, which it is extremely unlikely that it's going to be sold or converted, and in which the land isn't necessarily worth all that much anyway, other than potential stumpage. So again, I think it's not a peripheral consideration.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, MLA Burrill, for bringing that topic of conversation up. If there's more information that can be shared about that afterwards, that's great. MLA Barkhouse, and then MLA Jessome.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I was shocked when you mentioned in your opening statement about Fort Massey Cemetery - that it's owned by Veterans Affairs Canada if my notes are correct - and that there is no acknowledgement there. Do you have any insight as to why the federal government hasn't done anything there?

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: And how long have you been trying? That's part of the same question.

THE CHAIR: Sort of a follow-up then. Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: When I became engaged with the Unmarked Grave Program in 2018, I immediately set my sights on Fort Massey. Ironically, when I was doing the research, I discovered the unmarked grave of one of our Black soldiers from the No. 2 Construction Battalion and he now has a marker. So there's some good that came out of it.

When I started the initial research, we brought it up with Veterans Affairs Canada, and at the time, there was a bit of a plan to try to remedy the situation. Unfortunately, the gentleman who was running it retired and there was a change of who was running the program there. We have raised it with Veterans Affairs Canada. We're trying to keep it on their front burner. At this juncture, the front steps area when you initially go to that cemetery is falling apart, and that's their immediate concern at the moment. They're trying to fix that. So once that's done, the plan apparently is to proceed with commemoration of these other people.

Some of the other issues that they're facing are that some of the burials are relatively shallow in that cemetery, and there are multiple burials in single plots. You can have three burials in one plot, for example. Each of our standard upright markers has to go down a minimum of 18 inches, and it's concrete, so they're really concerned about bumping into some problems - and one corner of Fort Massey also contains a mass grave from the cholera outbreak in the early 1800s. So there are some issues that Veterans Affairs Canada has to address before they do anything more permanent there, but we're really hoping that it does get addressed in the future.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse for a follow-up.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: You say there are 750 unmarked graves. This may be very hard to answer. You say that there might be three burials in one plot, but do you have

an idea of how many veterans are buried there - marked and unmarked? Do you have the number that you have managed to mark over the years?

STEVE ST. AMANT: No, I can't give you exact numbers. Of the 750 unmarked graves that I'm aware of - and they're the names that were provided to me by Veterans Affairs Canada from their database. You can actually go online and search the database for Fort Massey Cemetery. When I started looking through it, it's not just soldiers who are buried there. It was also a garrison cemetery for dependants - there are unmarked graves of spouses of serving soldiers at the time and their children. There are family members buried in there as well, in addition to imperial troops and sailors, so there's a mixed bag.

At this point, there are approximately 50 Canadian soldiers who would qualify for a marker under our Unmarked Grave Program. But we can't proceed with anything just yet because we have to work with Veterans Affairs Canada on that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Thanks for the opportunity, Mr. Chair. Good conversation, everybody. Thanks for your engagement all around the table.

My question is related to the current circumstances whereby we're seeing the cost of living stress families more, perhaps, than has been the case in some years. As much as I can weigh in on that as a 36-year-old man, from what I gather based on the conversations that I hear through constituents and through the Legislature - and I'm sure we all get the same - there's pressure out there that is profound.

I'm curious to know how the present circumstances have impacted your organization. Are there more people banging on your door? What's your perspective on your organization as it relates to the challenges that people are facing with respect to the cost of living?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I'll start. Steve may have some things to add to it.

Part of the issue is that we're still waiting for this to play through the system. The cost of living increase really has been ramped up over the past year, year and a half. I think you're going to see more people coming forward to the program if they're aware of it - people who were surviving based on an investment portfolio that is not worth what it was worth; people whose household expenses have gone out and they've eaten into their savings because their various pension cheques are not going as far as they used to. I think you will see that come in.

This is part of our general conversation with Veterans Affairs Canada - about thresholds, about trying to acknowledge these types of things. In the past, when they've increased the threshold amount, it's been on a 1 per cent, based on what inflation has been for much of the last 20 years, not recognizing that that's been different in the last year and a half or so. So I think you're going to see an increase. Whether we've seen it yet or not, I don't know that there's enough time that has passed yet to see that influx.

[2:45 p.m.]

Part of it was COVID-19 as well. I know that gets used a lot in terms of what impact it has, but in a lot of cases, people were putting off funerals. In a lot of cases, people were making them simpler affairs because they wanted to get it done. So the cost they were doing was not what they would otherwise have done, but they did the best they could so the costs weren't as high.

I have no doubt that there were people who otherwise would have qualified but the amount they were spending was so small they didn't bother making an application. I think that will start to change as well as we go forward. I expect there will be an increase, especially as the modern-day veterans come through the system as well, because a lot of the ones who would have fought in 1990-91, the first Gulf War - that was 32 years ago.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant for a comment.

STEVE ST. AMANT: I did kind of do a little inner chuckle when you mentioned your age there, Mr. Jessome, because we have combat veterans who are younger than you are.

As you're well aware, we had a very tragic circumstance. One of our Afghan veterans with severe PTSD - was it Mr. Downey?

ROBERT CARTER: Desmond.

STEVE ST. AMANT: Desmond. That kind of situation has come up. We will bury those people. That's another thing that we need to clarify here. When a veteran left the military, generally it's on honourable terms. What they do after they've left the military - as nefarious as it might be - we will bury them. We will provide them with a proper funeral and service. I just want to make that clear.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome for a follow-up.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for that information, folks. With respect to my colleagues' comments about the supplementary funding that the Department of Community Services provides, is that something that stacks with your program or is that counted as income?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: From our perspective, it doesn't. We wouldn't look at that. I'm guessing DCS would, though. I guess I'll turn to the former minister or someone on the current side who may know, but the Last Post Fund would not - if there's money available through there as well. It wouldn't be our issue. I wonder about DCS, whether they would scale back if we're involved. I don't know.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I want to thank my colleague, MLA Burrill, for bringing that one aspect up. There are so many more. We may still be in the position of meeting with families and them asking for some guidance from us. Could you - this is all-encompassing here - just give a little bit of the criteria that a veteran will need in order to meet the eligibility?

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: I'll tackle each of the programs. When the Funeral and Burial Program comes up, basically it's an assessment of liabilities and assets. If at the end of the day, their assets amount to less than \$40,000, they qualify for the Funeral and Burial Program. If they're over that \$40,000, then they're not going to qualify. Again, we don't count the house, we don't count the car. In fact, our counsellors favour the veteran. I want to make that clear. They do their best to ensure that the veteran will get the best possible outcome.

There's also the Matter-of-Right Program, which is kind of an offshoot of the Funeral and Burial Program. Here's a great example. A gentleman was on submarines, and he had cancer that was attributed to his service on submarines, and when he passed away, the family called in to Veterans Affairs Canada. They said, look, he died as a result of his service. What that does is it eliminates the means test. If they die because of something related to their service, the matter-of-right component will kick in. Now I have to say the family must call Veterans Affairs Canada. We do not tackle that. Veterans Affairs Canada has the medical staff that can review the files and look after that. I want to make that one clear.

The Unmarked Graves Program - the veteran has to be in an unmarked grave for more than five years and we have to have proof of service, proof of death. The benefit is - as Ms. Regan pointed out about family members - if the veteran is already in the plot and then the spouse passes on and they go into the plot, her name or his name can be added to the veteran's marker. We try to do that. Again, it's not advertised that much, but we will provide that service. We've seen that quite a bit so far with some of the markers around here in Metro. I think I covered it. Does that answer your question?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: Just in further follow-up, I think you and your staff would easily be people who would be asked to help with forms like this. This is exactly what people go to their local MLA's office for. I think being able and familiar with the program would be helpful for that.

One thing you and Mr. Burrill commented on is the clergy. That's something that I will take away from here. I can say in Nova Scotia we have not spent a lot of time getting word out to clergy, as long as I've been around, but it's something that I think we should. You're absolutely case in point, especially in rural areas. You're the point of contact with the family, so I just wanted to highlight that. I appreciate that. I hadn't thought of that.

LARRY HARRISON: Is there a particular rationale behind the criteria? Just as a general statement.

ROBERT CARTER: I think the rationale is Veterans Affairs Canada is trying not to cover the funeral and burials of people who could otherwise afford it. They've got to pick a number somewhere, so they pick a number that is darn near the poverty line. You can figure out in your own worlds, if you eliminate the house, the car, the pension - people often have a tax-free savings account or they've got an RRSP or an RIF that's got money in it. If I were suspicious, I'd say Veterans Affairs Canada is trying to save money - which is probably true - but they're trying to make the number at a level that is near the poverty line. They're trying to get those people focused on rather than what I would argue should be the higher threshold, simply because if the veteran passes away, there's often a spouse who has to live on.

Veterans traditionally have always been male, less so now, but traditionally, and often with a stay-at-home spouse. What's the spouse supposed to do? I think there needs to be more flexibility with the threshold, but we're not the ones they ask about that. They tell us, not we tell them. In terms of why, that's basically it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Mr. Carter, in your opening remarks, you talked a bit about some of the work that's being done by volunteers. I'm wondering if you could expand on some of the roles that volunteers play within the Last Post Fund.

ROBERT CARTER: I will talk about it at the higher level, and then Mr. St. Amant, who has run the Unmarked Grave Program, can speak about it in that context. He navigates with a lot of the volunteers, including in one case a Duke of Edinburgh student, who was involved with our program and helping.

The branch is all made up of volunteers, and a lot of them are former service members. They volunteer their time, not just at the branch level, but also with the engagement. When we had the various powwows, we had branch members who were there for most of the weekends attending, setting up tables. Steve was at the No. 2 Construction Battalion ceremony in Truro. He and I were invited up to be part of that. I was tied up that weekend, but Steve attended.

It's just getting the word out on the street level. With my job, I'm around the province seeing people, and I will talk about Last Post Fund while I'm there. I'm going to Cape Breton at the end of this month for a court appearance. Part of the trip will be heading out to check on this gravesite in Dominion, out at that end of the Island. That's at the higher level. In terms of the Unmarked Grave Program in particular, Steve runs that and is right on the ground with that. I'll defer to him on that one.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: We have a program called the Lost Veterans Initiative, and it's a volunteer program. Basically, somebody will get in touch and say they're interested. In a lot of circumstances, I need boots on the ground. Clearly, I can't cover the entire province. There are over 2,000 cemeteries in this province. Some are older, some are younger, but I can't get to them all.

Volunteers will come in and say they would like to participate in this. What we do is give them a little bit of training. I'll take them into Fairview Lawn Cemetery, which allows many examples of what we're trying to achieve with the Unmarked Grave Program. I'll walk them through that - what to look for, what to see. Then I'll try to run another component where we do some of the online research via Ancestry.com and using some of those databases that are online. Then once they start off, we get them involved, and they can start submitting applications for unmarked graves themselves. We just let them go to it.

In a nutshell, that's what we do with the Lost Veterans Initiative. Admittedly, I find it very difficult to run it, because people's interests wax and wane. Some people come in, they're full, and two weeks later you don't hear from them again. It's a bit of a challenge with volunteers sometimes, but we certainly love having them.

As Bob mentioned, a couple of years ago, a young lady by the name of Gaby Fenwick was working toward her Duke of Edinburgh Award, and we brought her in. One of the pillars of the Duke of Edinburgh Award is community service. We spoke to the Duke of Edinburgh Award program here, and they said, yes, they'd totally accept that as community service. That's another option for some of your youth in your ridings if they're interested. What better people to work local cemeteries than locals in that area who know them? If they can help, we're ready to have them.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: We actually spoke a little bit in a way, but in your role with the Last Post Fund, are there any lessons or trends that you've learned or that you've noticed in the best ways to find unmarked graves? Have you gotten better? What have you learned from this?

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: The west of Canada has had greater success with regard to the Unmarked Graves Program. I think I would attribute that largely because after the First World War, a lot of the young guys went out west. They got land and put down roots, that kind of thing. Here, not so much. The tools that we use - we manipulate databases all the time to kick out information that we can follow up. Getting access - and this goes back to the archives or Vital Statistics. We could really use your help in that regard.

As it currently stands, the provincial archives will only allow us to look at vital stats for 50 years prior, if you know what I mean. Right now, I can look at vital statistics up to about 1969-1970, but as you can well imagine, most of our Second World War veterans who passed on, passed away after 1970 - but I can't view their record. The problem with that is, in many circumstances, the death certificate tells me where that veteran was buried. If I know where the veteran is, then I'm allowed to go to that particular cemetery, talk to the caretaker, and ask where this person was buried. But I can't do that, because I can't access the data.

That's something we hope this committee could perhaps help us with - figuring out a way that we can get that data and view it when possible. It would certainly help us out in a large way.

The majority of our finds up to this point are First World War veterans because the Canadian Expeditionary Force database is currently online, so within seconds, I can pull up a First World War veteran's service file. I can also - because it's 1969 and prior in Nova Scotia - go on Vital Statistics and pull their death certificate. Bang bang - I've got the two key pieces of information I need to submit an application. But anybody after 1970 is a problem.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: You talked earlier, and then just now, of things like the special rate for death certificates or marriage certificates. You've talked about us sharing your newsletter, and you've just talked about how you can't go back before 1970. I'm just wondering if you have any ideas or suggestions of how MLAs can support your search for unmarked graves in Nova Scotia. Is there something to keep our eyes open and if we're talking to someone - I'm just trying to think of all the ways that we can help. We do speak with a lot of people in the run of a day, and we do read a lot.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: Absolutely. I'm throwing it out there. I don't know if it's possible or not, but perhaps an MOU could be arranged between the Last Post Fund and maybe the provincial government. I don't know. That would certainly help.

[3:00 p.m.]

The other one: Legions within the communities often know who's a veteran. Some of the elderly folks in that community say, "yes, I knew this guy, and he's buried over in that cemetery, but I don't know if he has a marker or not." A lot of those people are very rich in local knowledge and where people are and who they were. That's a big help. At Western Head down by Bridgewater, one of the caretakers said, "Yes, I know of a couple of veterans. They're over there" - and they only have an aluminum cross on their gravesite, so technically it's an unmarked grave and eligible for a marker. So we'll get the markers.

I'll also point out that there's no cost to the family. If they want the marker, it's handled. In a lot of cases, they take the marker.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I'm just going to add to that in terms of what you folks could do at the local level. It's absolutely communicating the word. When you're visiting a nursing home and talking to the people there, just mention to them, "Do you know of any veterans in the graveyard over there that you know of?" If they say, yes, then just put them in touch with us or get in touch with us, and we'll take it from there - things like that. If you're at a Remembrance Day service, which people attend, don't be afraid to ask people about veterans.

Older folks have a lot of knowledge, and they remember, but if nobody asks them, they don't bother saying it. That's something that I think that you guys at the local level would be able to have, and would have that relationship, versus someone like Steve or me rolling into town and trying to talk to people. They'll talk to you. They're not terribly interested in talking to me. So I'd add that as well.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. MLA Burrill is next, then MLA Regan, and then MLA Jessome.

GARY BURRILL: I just want to go back to what you were saying in your introductory thoughts about how it would be helpful if at Service Nova Scotia - if I understood you right - processing fees were waived for death certificate applications to do with research related to the Last Post Fund. Is that what you had proposed?

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: I don't necessarily need a hard copy. I just need a photo, an image of the death certificate. As long as I get the information, that's really all I'm concerned about. I think there are privacy aspects, which is why that kind of 50-year rule is in place. But if there is a way to talk to the Department of Community Services and get in on a periodic basis - I need info on these guys, can you provide that? If it's just the images, I'm happy with that too.

GARY BURRILL: I'm not sure I understood exactly. I took from what you said originally that it was the processing fee that was problematic - that you didn't necessarily have a budget for that and that each application at Vital Statistics comes with a charge. I thought I heard you say that it would be helpful if there was some means by which the government could waive that charge for the Last Post Fund research. Is that what you meant?

STEVE ST. AMANT: That would be fine. The fee isn't applicable pre-1970 because I can go on Vital Statistics and pull that information - easy-peasy. It's post-1970 that causes the issue. Because that information is not online, if I wanted to know the death of John Bloggins in Yarmouth, for example, I would have to go to the Department of Community Services, request a death certificate and pay that applicable fee in order to get that information. That's kind of our issue at the moment. Does that clear that up for you?

GARY BURRILL: One last quick question?

THE CHAIR: One last quick question.

GARY BURRILL: Would it be helpful, from your point of view, if this committee were to write Service Nova Scotia and request that they give consideration to the waiving of those fees in that post-1970 research when it was being conducted under the auspices of the fund?

STEVE ST. AMANT: Absolutely. In 2019, we actually drafted a letter to the Premier of Nova Scotia at the time requesting that - and we never got a reply. I think we followed up again in 2020. Again, there was silence. This was one of the key reasons we're here today, is to kind of help along with that. So, absolutely, Mr. Burrill - that would be of immense benefit to us.

THE CHAIR: MLA Regan.

KELLY REGAN: Yes - 2019, 2020 - that makes me think of COVID, which may be why you didn't get a reply. That actually leads me to ask the question: Have your services been impacted by COVID during this time?

ROBERT CARTER: They've been seriously impacted because we hadn't been able to get out. For long periods of time, there were restrictions because of COVID on

travelling the province. As a lawyer, I had exceptions that I could go for legal work, but I didn't quite think that the Last Post Fund were qualified under my umbrella as a lawyer, so I declined. We couldn't meet anybody. Nobody wanted us from Halifax rolling into their house in Dominion or in Barrington Passage. That was a huge impact, quite frankly, in spreading awareness. We had planned some things that we were going to do through 2019 and then into 2020 that just fell apart.

Another one of the impacts has been - and it's just a practical thing - with the Tattoo. We always had a booth at the Tattoo every night. People come in, and we would be there with our banners and our information, and we'd talk to people. Of course, when the Tattoo was cancelled, that didn't work. Then in the last couple of years when they've had a Tattoo of some kind, they have declined to have us in, or anybody in. We were offered the opportunity to sponsor and go in the program, but that was expensive, and we just didn't have the budget for it.

Those are the sorts of practical things that COVID has impacted. Now that we're kind of living with COVID - coming out of all of this - we're trying to get back in.

This Summer, we did get out to see people. We were at various powwows. We went to the No. 2 Construction Battalion Ceremony, Remembrance Day. At one point, we were allowed to go in early and lay a wreath before the ceremony. Then one year, a small number of us - we were allowed to go down, but the public was not invited down. This past November, we had a full service. It was probably the hottest Remembrance Day I've ever had - at the Halifax Grand Parade, and a number of the soldiers needed medical attention from the heat. But it was a full service again. We were able to go up and lay our wreath with everyone else. The public was there in huge numbers, and they came down afterward, and it was well done. That's nice, but all of that was on hold through COVID.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: One thing that had a significant impact across the country was a shortage of granite. I don't know if most of you are aware, but for the markers that are in the cemeteries, the granite is supplied from India. If you can imagine about a year and half ago, they were talking about Indian hospitals being overwhelmed. They had no workers in the quarries providing granite. No granite, no markers. We've only just started to catch up with some of the back orders for our grave markers to get installed. That was another significant impact.

THE CHAIR: MLA Regan.

KELLY REGAN: That's an impact I'd never considered, I have to say.

I was listening to my two colleagues who are MLAs but also members of the clergy. It reminded me of something that a friend of mine once said about MLAs being

with their constituents on the best days of their lives and the worst days of their lives: when they have to bury a spouse or whatever. This past week alone, I was at two funerals - a 44-year-old mum and an 89-year-old grandfather/great-grandfather, et cetera. I do think we're a valuable resource. Members of Parliament, too - they would know about that. Often our councillors are very accessible, and people will reach out to them. Those are all points where you could possibly reach out.

The other thing that struck me was when you were talking about older folks knowing who's buried where. I've done a fair bit of work with our local historical society in Bedford, Scott Manor House. There's a network of those historical societies across the province. They might be really helpful in determining where people might be in unmarked graves. We do a graveyard walk every year in one of the local cemeteries, and there's a lot of knowledge with that historical society. I just thought that might be another place you might want to reach out to too. It's not really a question, unless you have something else you'd like to add.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Going back to one of your asks as it pertains to the limitations around applications - the one-year limit. I'm curious if you can weigh in on any feedback that you've got from the feds with respect to the ask to extend that. I'll leave it at that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: This came up when I was at the national meetings in June. The federal government is very reluctant to increase it one year, because they talk about wanting certainty and wanting to have an end date. They don't want long tails of these things. If I was cross-examining the minister, I might suggest to him that perhaps it has to do with cutting off people before they have a chance to apply and it keeps the money down, but I don't want to cast aspersions on the federal government.

Their argument, quite frankly, is that they want to avoid a long tail, which I think is crazy, because you're not talking about vast sums of money at the federal level. I just think that the overriding desire to look after veterans should trump whether somebody gets back to them in 18 months or two years or six months. That shouldn't matter on something like this, but all we can do is just keep pushing at the national level with Veterans Affairs.

BEN JESSOME: I'd be interested to know: Have you identified other funding programs that would have a similar expiry date? My colleague referenced a gift card program with no end dates on it. I can appreciate the desire to have the ability to tighten things up and wrap things up as seamlessly as possible, but it creates a certain barrier for families. I'm wondering, have you delved into other types of programs that may have either a flexible end date or something that's more extended than one year?

[3:15 p.m.]

ROBERT CARTER: Not specifically, although that's not a bad analogy. I hadn't thought of that, to be honest. That's not a bad analogy. One of the things we've tried to do over the past year, and we're intending to try to do more of, is hive off some of the expenses we incur through the Indigenous Veterans Initiative, and try to get some funding through Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. They might be prepared to put some money in that would not decrease what we get from Veterans Affairs Canada, but would give us additional money for that program. We're not trying to treat them as different veterans. It's entirely about trying to find funding sources.

The suggestion from one of the staff we were talking to over the last year or so has been that we might get some favourable ears in Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada with respect to funding for that program.

In terms of the idea of trying to look at other programs that don't have funding deadlines, I don't know specifically, but I think that's something we should definitely be looking at. We've been talking about it more from the level of it's the right thing to do. Sometimes it's just the right thing to do - whereas maybe that might be an avenue. I hadn't thought of that, and I don't know if anybody at the national level has done anything with that aspect of it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome for a quick, final follow-up.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Chair. Just a quick suggestion. Perhaps you've already gone down this road - a humble suggestion. In supporting your efforts, there may be an opportunity through the Canada Summer Jobs program to do some of this finite research. I'm not sure - maybe one of my colleagues can weigh in about the deadline for those applications - but I know that it's coming up soon.

There's support to fill out those applications and make those asks for some of these things for you folks that may be perhaps a valuable tool. I know that local organizations certainly benefit from that program. Students come in for the Summer and do a project. In this case, it may be identifying a number of different things that may be on your to-do list that your group of volunteers simply don't have the time to take to make it work. Just a humble suggestion.

THE CHAIR: Is there a comment you'd like to make to that, Mr. St. Amant?

STEVE ST. AMANT: We have pursued that route. As a matter of fact, our colleagues in Newfoundland and Labrador routinely have that Summer student program. The way they do it is they're tied to the Tattoo. It all has to do with having an entity to tie those kids to. The Last Post Fund, as a national organization - provincially we can't tie them to our office in Montreal. There are some, how can I say it, some bureaucratic red

tape rules that surround that. That's one of the reasons why we haven't necessarily done that here, but we are aware of that.

I would also like to point out as another point about that one-year - getting that phone call in. The way it works in the Last Post Fund, when a family member or an executor or whoever calls on behalf of a veteran within that year, their name is logged - date, time, all that good stuff. The good thing about that is, even after one year - let's say a veteran was cremated or whatever, and in year two, for example, they finally figure out, okay, we're going to bury this guy here - those services will still apply because the family or the executor called within that one year.

I can't emphasize that enough to all of you. Tell your constituents to call. The day of death or a couple of days after, call the Last Post Fund and start the process within the year. If things change after that one year, they're covered, because they made the phone call. If you go beyond that one year, it's end game.

I hope that clarifies that one-year thing.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I want to thank you for the passion and compassion that you bring to what you do, to the vets and their families.

Just to piggyback on some of MLA Barkhouse's and others' questions, would you have a sense of short-term goals and long-term goals that you would like to tell us so that we understand what's needed, and in the process, perhaps give some assistance as well. Do you have some short-term or long-term goals that you can share?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I'll start off. In terms of short-term goals, we would definitely like the access to Vital Statistics. We'd like the awareness - as much awareness as we can get would be important.

In terms of longer-term goals, we have Fields of Honour in a number of cemeteries around the province. I think getting work done on those would be helpful, and getting some of these cemeteries cleaned up. There's a real jurisdictional issue as to who owns it when it's been abandoned, and there's often not funds in the community to maintain it, or volunteers. Being able to work on that - that's more of a longer-term thing, but I think that is something that is going to be an issue.

I know Steve has got some other things, so I'm going to let him weigh in on what he sees as his short-term and long-term goals.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: One of the things we're trying to do is, in 1958 HRM provided the Last Post Fund with a plot of land in Fairview Lawn Cemetery. That is our primary Field of Honour for Nova Scotia. It has the capacity for about 225 burials. Most of those are now filled and complete.

We now have a second Field of Honour not far from that one, and we're working on that. As a matter of fact, we had a veteran buried there who was a homeless vet - very tragic circumstances. The man passed away, but he was tickled pink that he knew he was going to go to a veterans' plot.

We're trying to make them look like a proper military plot. I don't know if any of you have visited the cemeteries in France and Belgium, but that's what I would envision - having a really nice, manicured cemetery. We're also looking at having an information board established so that we can tell the story of the Last Post Fund and illustrate some of our veterans.

I'll also point out that the Last Post Fund has buried the majority of the No. 2 Construction Battalion. Even back post-First World War, we were one of the few organizations that didn't see colour, race, anything else. A veteran is a veteran. We'll bury them and we'll give them the dignity that they deserve.

One of the primary short-term goals for me is to ensure that the current Fields of Honour that we run are going to look good in the future, and have a dignified area that looks like a proper veterans' site.

LARRY HARRISON: No question, but you're right. I've been to one in France, for instance, and they are just absolutely - yes. I couldn't believe how well they do that - names, sites, everything. It's just immaculate and well-cared-for. Yes, you're right, we need to grab onto that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: Thank you, gentlemen, for being here today. As a last-minute substitute, I was resigned to not asking any questions today, but sitting here listening, there were a couple of things that came to mind. The two questions are unrelated, so I'm hoping the Chair doesn't notice that they're not a follow-up. The first one is on your funding models. I'm assuming that you're funded completely by Veterans Affairs Canada. Am I correct in that assumption?

ROBERT CARTER: The programs themselves are funded entirely by Veterans Affairs Canada. The local branch, as well as the national level, accepts donations. We don't go looking for donations at the local branch. Some of the branches do require donations.

We've been fortunate to have had a couple of larger donations in the past, so we don't go looking for donations, but we have people who make donations. When they do, we use that for some of the extras.

For instance, when we're looking at getting some stuff done on the Field of Honour, the city of Halifax will pay for some things. We'll have money available for additional things. That's donations, but the programs themselves are funded entirely by Veterans Affairs Canada.

We don't use donations for the programs. We're not going to go in and take people in the Funeral and Burials Program who didn't get accepted by Veterans Affairs Canada and start paying for them ourselves. We wouldn't have the money. We'd run out of money so quickly, but there are donations for extras. As I said earlier, we're looking at maybe finding some funding from Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada to deal with the Indigenous program if we can.

STEVE ST. AMANT: Just to add on to that, the funds the branches have within the provinces - we can use those monies for things that don't fall under our routine programs, like the Funeral and Burial Program. There are some great examples. We have seven or eight Silver Cross Mothers in this province who've been buried, and we would love to commemorate them as well. They were chosen by the Legion, and they represented moms who've lost their children. One of them is buried here in Fairview Lawn Cemetery. At some point, I would love to see them get a marker.

Other circumstances are veterans who may have served in the British Army or something like that, and somebody calls up and says, "Hey, can we get this guy a marker?" The branch can discuss it and vote on it, and potentially approve that. For example, we have veterans in this province who fought at Waterloo. I think that'd be kind of neat to get them a marker. I'm trying to find where these guys are buried. There are two or three I'm aware of. They would not qualify for that marker program, so that's where we would use some of our money to do that.

KENT SMITH: We've talked a lot about outreach, and what you did in a non-COVID situation would be the Tattoo, and Remembrance Day ceremonies, and things like that. For me - this is just another form of clarification. Would I be correct in assuming that every Legion across the province would be well aware of the Last Post Fund, and what you're able to do, and how you're able to implement the programs?

ROBERT CARTER: Historically, yes. A lot of the Legions, especially in the last few years, have declining numbers and they don't have the service officers. Traditionally, the service officers were the individuals who were there who would help people with programs. They would be the ones who would have engaged them with Veterans Affairs Canada. They would help them with paperwork, and that sort of thing. They traditionally knew all about the Last Post Fund, and they would be there to distribute that information. A

lot of the branches don't have service officers anymore, or they have people holding the title, but they're really not doing the position because there just isn't enough to do.

[3:30 p.m.]

Part of what we've been doing since COVID had started to lessen, and the restrictions lessened, is we've been reaching out to the Legion again. I would like to have visited a bunch of Legions as I'm travelling around the province for work, but with COVID, I couldn't. One of the things we did was Steve and I met with the Legion executive for the province. Our past president, Paul O'Boyle, met with the service officer at the province level, and they spent a couple of hours going through all the programs. He was going to distribute it.

At the national level, they've been trying to engage with the national Legion to spread the word. We have had contact with some individual Legions around the province who have reached out for information. As I said, when I'm in Cape Breton in two weeks, I'm meeting with somebody from the Legion in the Dominion area. It's been that sort of thing.

Traditionally, they knew all about us. It was clear when we met with the executive that information had not transferred, and a lot of them didn't really know what we did. They knew we did burials or something, but they didn't know much more than that. That was part of our outreach - to re-educate them on what we do.

THE CHAIR: I will indulge you, MLA Smith, for one last follow-up.

KENT SMITH: Thank you, I appreciate it, Mr. Chair. Do you have brochures with you? You mentioned earlier you carry them in your briefcase.

ROBERT CARTER: I can certainly arrange to get brochures to your offices. I can tell you that I've run out, and I'm waiting for some. We made a point of getting some to a couple of the veterans' groups in Dartmouth, a couple of veterans there. Also, we've been working with a couple of the Indigenous offices and getting brochures there. I'm actually out of brochures. When I get more in, I can certainly make a point of sending them around. I have a committee list here. I will send them around to your offices. Again, it's just outreach. It's about getting the word out any way we can.

THE CHAIR: That's a good problem to have. Mr. St. Amant.

STEVE ST. AMANT: Just to add on to Bob's comments. I've spoken to two widows in the past few months. The first question I asked them was, did the funeral home tell you about the Last Post Fund? There was no reply. They said no. We're having difficulties at times with that information. When they do find out, they do make the phone call and get the ball rolling.

Not all funeral homes are like that. Actually, J.A. Snow Funeral Home has been very proactive to reach out to us and say, how does this work and how can you help us out? We'll work with anyone in that regard. It's an unfortunate aspect right now that some funeral homes are just not - it doesn't get mentioned.

THE CHAIR: In the interest of time - I mentioned that we would conclude our questioning at 3:45 p.m. There's some committee business that we might have to attend to. I think we'll shorten the question and answer period to 3:40 p.m. to allow you to have a chance to give some closing comments. MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I just want to say you guys did a great job for it being your first time, and your first time 13 years-plus. As a daughter of a deceased veteran, I find it very heartwarming what you guys are doing. He was very fortunate to have a burial.

When it becomes time, I would like to put a motion forward that this committee write the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services to connect with the Last Post Fund, and explore ways in which they can be supported to further their cause of ensuring all veterans have a dignified burial.

THE CHAIR: We can look into that at committee business. Are there any other questions? MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I'll just get one more in here, folks. Thank you for your indulgence. Other than some of the subject matter that we've discussed today, with respect to the purview of the provincial government, is there anything that we haven't touched on that you would add that you have a direct line to the Province with versus the feds?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: I think we've canvassed it all today. You guys have been very thorough with the questions and clearly engaged with the topic. We really appreciate that. A lot of it is at the federal level, so we're trying our best, but we appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: Maybe as the Chair - it was mentioned to get brochures to all committee members, but I'd like to request that they be sent to every MLA in the province as well. They can be sent to our committee clerk, and they can distribute them to the Legislature for all MLAs as well.

With that being said, and no more questions, we'd like to give our witnesses an opportunity to give a closing statement and any final words for us. We can begin with Mr. Carter.

ROBERT CARTER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to thank you all for listening here this afternoon and listening to our story. We are engaged in trying to provide

some dignity to veterans in their final days. I came into this through my interest in history. Veterans were not always treated well in this country after campaigns. I am going to do my darnedest in my time to try to at least make some positive changes in that area.

Anything that you guys can do to spread the word is great. If you or anybody in your office or anybody you know has questions, don't hesitate to pass them along to us. We have a website that has contact information. Someone can easily find me on Google - I'm not hard to find - and track me down with questions. If I don't have an answer, I'll find an answer or I'll find someone who's got an answer.

I really do appreciate your time in this. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. St. Amant, do you have any final words?

STEVE ST. AMANT: No. I would echo Bob's comments, and I sincerely appreciate your motion, Ms. Barkhouse. We will get back to you regarding your question regarding the rural aspect. I think that's an interesting one, and we're going to follow up. We'll get that info back to you.

Thanks to all of you for listening to us today. We sincerely appreciate it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you both for appearing today. Thank you for your service.

At this point, we will let you know that you are free to leave. I think we'll take a three-minute recess as you leave the room, and then we'll get back to our committee business after that. Thank you very much for coming.

[3:38 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[3:43 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. We have some committee business to attend to. Obviously, discussions in this committee meeting today were very informative. It seems like we might have some people who want to have a discussion around a few things from this committee meeting. MLA Burrill, you had raised the comment first, so do you have a comment or conversation about anything?

GARY BURRILL: MLA Barkhouse has a motion to bring forward, and I'd be happy to hear the motion.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'd like to make a motion to write a letter requesting that the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services connect with the Last

Post Fund and explore ways in which they can be supported to further their cause of ensuring all veterans have a dignified burial.

[3:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: We have a motion on the table. It seems pretty clear, but is there any discussion around that? No discussion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Is there any other discussion? MLA Burrill, did you have a comment about anything? No. From our committee business, we also have a motion that's been on the table since our November meeting. (Interruption) I'm sorry. MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Just in keeping with the spirit of connecting with counterparts outside the room here, there were a number of asks that came from our presenters today. I'm wondering if I need to be overly specific. My intent is, through the Chair, to have the committee reach out to Veterans Affairs Canada to make the ask about the recognition monument at Fort Massey, to make the ask about the limitations around the one-year time limit with respect to applying, and the ask for an extension of that date.

My suggestion would be to - based on those two in particular - have the Chair and the clerk craft a letter to VAC to let them know that we've been made aware of those two situations, and ask them to provide the committee with a response. If that's adequate for a motion today, then perfect. If not, then perhaps I can revisit it and bring it back next time.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Can you repeat that, please?

BEN JESSOME: The two initial ones that come to mind reference Fort Massey Cemetery owned by Veterans Affairs Canada and the lack of a monument that should be stood up at that location. I guess the inquiry would be: Are there plans to establish something at that location?

The second one has to do with Veterans Affairs Canada's limitations around applications for the program. Their ask was for an extension of three years. The present scenario is one year. My suggestion would be to have the Chair and the clerk craft a letter to VAC making inquiries about those two items, and ask them to provide the committee with a response so that we have that for information purposes, and we can make our business in response to those comments from VAC.

THE CHAIR: MLA Regan.

KELLY REGAN: Further to my colleague's comments about the one-year timeline, I understand why they would like a one-year timeline. There's certainty, et cetera. Particularly with COVID-19, what we saw was that there were great swaths of time where people couldn't gather, et cetera. I really think pointing out to the department that for many families it was very difficult for people to travel, and to get out and look at headstones - all kinds of things. Perhaps that's a way in the door - just dealing with the COVID side of things and that it did, in fact, delay people.

It would have been good if we were doing this back in 2020 probably, but it just seems to me that things changed in 2020, and perhaps that could be a way that we could introduce this as a reason for a change.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: I don't think that we have any issues with the suggestions made by our colleagues opposite. I would maybe friendly-amend it to include some notion of reviewing the rates for funeral costs. As they noted in their presentation, that \$7,000 and change doesn't seem to be quite enough.

THE CHAIR: I think we're pretty clear with the three requests in a letter drafted between myself and the clerk. There's a motion on the table. No further discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: We've got a little bit of time here, so just to check this other piece off here. Our guests referenced the state of the cemetery in Cape Breton. I personally don't know exactly the road to take to support the cause of dealing with that. I'm wondering if any of my colleagues around the table have any suggestions on who or how we, as a committee, might approach finding a solution to deal with that situation.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I remember reading this in the paper several years ago. I think there was a group that would have addressed some of this in the past. I don't remember who the group was. So there is information out there if it happened in the past as well. That's all I know on that topic, though.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Mr. Carter stated a few times that he was going to go down there very shortly. Maybe the best suggestion would be asking the clerk to write to him for his advice. In all honesty, I don't know what we can do, and I don't think a lot of us know.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I don't mean to be presumptuous, but to our two clergy members, is there a process for dealing with derelict gravesites or fixing up cemeteries that is a requirement to follow? Just a thought. I support my colleague, the member for Chester-St. Margaret's, to reconnect with Mr. Carter - to stay close to that and try to get some more information. I'm just curious if there's a body that deals with that sort of stuff, or does it fall on the church, or what?

THE CHAIR: Where the comment was directed to one of our clergy members, I'll allow one of them to speak before we come to you, MLA Regan.

MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Our experiences might be different, but whenever I've run into that situation, I try to get the communities active to do it - through volunteerism, actually - because the money is just not there. Gravesites do need attention. There's no getting around it. That's been my approach in community: to get the community itself to take that on. It's worked so far. Gary?

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: I don't remember Mr. Carter saying where or under what incorporation or jurisdiction the place was that he was speaking about. There's a big difference according to whether you're talking about community-owned, family-owned, church-owned, and so on.

I think without that information it might be hard to offer anything very helpful.

THE CHAIR: MLA Regan, do you have another comment?

KELLY REGAN: Just that he mentioned it was Dominion. It was really quick. For some reason I had the sense that it was a church cemetery because he was talking about churches shutting down, I think. I'm making an assumption. If it is a church cemetery, is there any burden that, in fact, the particular denomination bears for that cemetery? Again, I'm looking to our members of the clergy here.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: In the tradition that Reverend Harrison and I come from, it depends entirely on the specific circumstances of incorporation - whether or not the cemetery is incorporated under separate articles from the church. Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't.

That's the number one question to answer. We don't have an answer to this case.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Which is why I suggested we reach out to Mr. Carter. It was in Dominion. You are correct. It was in the ocean - but we don't know, and also Google is telling me quite a bit that we don't know. It would be best to have our facts straight before we start making motions on that order. Just stating that.

THE CHAIR: I would tend to agree with that, MLA Barkhouse. Just so I'm clear about the direction for the Chair and the clerk - basically, just to keep in touch about that through Mr. Carter. Then we can address a more formal situation at some point in the future.

I was reminded by our clerk and our counsel that in the last motion we passed, there was a friendly amendment put forward in that, and we should have voted on the amendment first before we voted on the motion. So we're just going to go back to that motion. There was a friendly amendment put forward by MLA Smith. Would you like to state that friendly amendment one more time, and then we can vote on that?

KENT SMITH: Word for word, I'm not sure exactly what I said. I believe it was something akin to in addition to Mr. Jessome's comments to address in the letter, to include some reference to reviewing the rates paid for funeral reimbursements.

THE CHAIR: We'll vote on that amendment.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now we'll vote on the motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded?

The motion is carried.

In our committee business that was listed for today's meeting was MLA Jessome's motion from November 15th regarding the Veterans Affairs mandate. MLA Jessome, did you have any comments, or is there any discussion around that?

BEN JESSOME: I'll just repeat the motion, and then we'll have a quick chat about it:

“Whereas the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs considers matters relating to veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Legion; and

Whereas matters pertaining to the Canadian Armed Forces predominantly fall under the jurisdiction of the national government; and

Whereas on June 14, 2022, the Minister Responsible for Military Relations and the Nova Scotia Government, the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services met with provincial and territorial delegates in Ottawa to ratify the Terms of Reference for the Seamless Canada initiative; and

Whereas the objective of Seamless Canada is to strengthen federal, provincial, and territorial collaboration to improve the relocation experience of CAF members by sharing information and best practices among jurisdictions and stakeholders; and

Whereas Seamless Canada has focused on matters pertaining to military families including:

- improved health care access for CAF families;
- securing essential worker status for CAF members;
- a review of education barriers for students relocating between jurisdictions; and
- leveraged employment and training support services for military spouses through the Military Spouse Employment Initiative and the Military Spousal Employment Network;

Therefore, I move that the Nova Scotia Legislature's Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs expands its mandate to include matters related to presently serving military families to support the work of Seamless Canada, as was ratified on June 14, 2022, by the Minister Responsible for Military Relations and the Government of Nova Scotia.”

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just a couple of comments for the committee. Ensuring that Nova Scotia's military community feels supported and recognized is a priority of this government, and whereas the Seamless Canada agreement was just signed in June - it's less than a year ago - I'd like to give it a little bit of time. Let's see how it functions and coordinates across the country before making significant changes to the committee.

BEN JESSOME: I'd like to add that I do appreciate that the terms of reference were signed, and I guess before we - motion to extend by five minutes?

THE CHAIR: There's a motion to extend our committee meeting.

BEN JESSOME: Five minutes. We can come back next week and deal with it, if you want.

THE CHAIR: We have to deal with the motion that was previously put forward before.

Order. Our time for the committee meeting is now over. Our next meeting will be on February 21st. The topic is still to be determined. Our committee clerk is reaching out to witnesses to confirm the availability of witnesses at that point in time. Our next committee meeting will be February 21st.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 4:00 p.m.]