

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**Tuesday, December 19, 2023**

**COMMITTEE ROOM**

**The Impact on Veterans and Military Families Amidst a Cost of Living Crisis**

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## **VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

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[Hon. Tony Ince was replaced by Braedon Clark.]

[Gary Burrill was replaced by Suzy Hansen.]

### **In Attendance:**

Tamer Nusseibeh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Legislative Counsel

## **WITNESSES**

### **Department of Community Services**

Melissa MacKinnon, Deputy Minister  
Tracy Embrett, Executive Director of Child & Family Wellbeing  
Joy Knight, Executive Director of Employment Support & Income Assistance

### **Department of Intergovernmental Affairs**

Dana MacKenzie, Deputy Minister  
Darryl Eisan, Director of Military Relations and Canada-United States Relations

### **Emergency Management Halifax Regional Municipality**

Erica Fleck, Director of Emergency Management

### **Halifax & Region Military Family Resource Centre**

Shelley Hopkins, Executive Director

### **The Canadian Legion Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command**

Craig Hood, Executive Director



**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 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. My name is Chris Palmer. I'm the MLA for Kings West and Chair of this committee. Good afternoon, everyone.

I'm just wondering who's actually working in the government today because you're all here. (Laughter) Great to see all your faces here. Welcome. Today we'll hear from presenters regarding The Impact on Veterans and Military Families Amidst a Cost of Living Crisis.

At this point, I'd like to ask everybody to please turn off your phones and put them on silent. In the case of an emergency, we will use the Granville Street exit and walk up to Grand Parade.

I will now ask the committee members, beginning on my left with MLA MacDonald, to introduce themselves and their constituencies for everybody to know. MLA MacDonald, we'll start with you.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For the purpose of Hansard, I'd like to also recognize the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb to my left, and Legislative Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh on my right.

As I mentioned, our topic today is The Impact on Veterans and Military Families Amidst a Cost of Living Crisis. I would like to ask all our witnesses who are at the table if they'd like to take a minute and introduce themselves, then I'll come back to anybody who may have some prepared opening remarks to give those. I'll begin with Ms. Embrett.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you all. I'll maybe just ask who might have prepared opening remarks by show of hands. Okay. Maybe what I'll do is begin with Ms. MacKinnon, and we'll go in that direction. Ms. MacKinnon for your opening remarks.

MELISSA MACKINNON: I'll be very brief, recognizing you have the opportunity to speak to me more so than other folks here. With me today are Joy Knight and Tracy Embrett.

I first just want to acknowledge while we're here the contribution of veterans and military families in all times of war, conflict, and peace. I know that comes with sacrifice and challenge, which we know can be exacerbated when everyone is struggling with the cost of living. While our department doesn't have specific programming for veterans and military families, they would be able to access various programs and services, and we would work in collaboration with some of our colleagues here today.

My thanks and appreciation to all of you here today. I just look forward to listening and being a part of the conversation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms. MacKenzie.

DANA MACKENZIE: Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to join you this afternoon. As Deputy Minister Responsible for Military Relations, I appreciate the opportunity to be part of today's discussions about veterans and military families, and the rising cost of living.

Canada's military has long played an important role in Nova Scotia's social and economic fabric. Home to Canada's largest military base, the east coast formation of the Royal Canadian Navy, and innovative and competitive aerospace and defence ecosystem - and soon to be home to the regional office of NATO's DIANA - this presence presents a major employer, a conduit for public safety, security, and a critical economic generator. It also represents thousands of people who become important members of our communities, whether they be military members and their families or veterans.

While Nova Scotia does not have legal or policy authority with respect to the military and its affairs - that rests with the federal government - the Military Relations portfolio was created in 2006 in Nova Scotia to establish a central point of contact within the Government of Nova Scotia. We communicate and work directly with federal agencies,

including the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and Veterans Affairs Canada, and we frequently meet with regional military and veteran-related organizations.

These connections are important for understanding any challenges facing this community, and helping to ensure the needs of our veterans, military members, and their families are met. In this time of higher inflation, we know many families are struggling.

As a Province, many of our programs and investments can help - things like reducing child care fees, and increasing the Seniors Care Grant and the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, work being done to improve affordable housing options - are available to military families and veterans. A more concrete example that directly supports the military community is our work with the Seamless Canada Steering Committee. Briefly, this committee was launched by the Department of National Defence to alleviate stressors imposed on their members and families when posted to another province. The committee focuses on the priority areas of spousal and partner employment, access to health care and child care, and youth education.

Here, the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs had been working with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration and Seamless Canada to help military spouses, partners, and families in securing employment upon their arrival to Nova Scotia. This work helps to raise awareness and access to provincial employment supports, ensure a collaborative community approach to available resources, and remove residency barriers to accessing employment programs and supports.

Nova Scotia has a strong interest in the well-being of our military community, and we're honoured to work with these other partners to support them. Like my colleague, Deputy Minister MacKinnon, I'm very much looking forward to the discussion today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms. Hopkins.

SHELLEY HOPKINS: The Halifax & Region Military Family Resource Centre is a non-profit charity organization whose mission is to strengthen the well-being of all those who share the unique experience of military life. It is governed by a volunteer board of directors that must be comprised of 51 per cent military family members.

Of all 32 MFRCs across the country, we are the largest, serving the largest operational base of approximately 10,000. We serve all three CAF elements here: Navy, Air Force, and Army. Geographically, we are responsible for the Halifax and region up to Cape Breton - basically all of Nova Scotia except for the Valley. We have two full-time sites at Windsor Park and 12 Wing Shearwater, and a satellite office in Cape Breton.

As a non-profit organization, we are agile and responsive with an ability to reallocate resources quickly and efficiently. For example, we served 38 families who needed accommodations during the wildfires.

Military Family Services is our primary funder and steward of the program. Donations and grants support our non-funded services, such as our specialized and respite child care. MFRC services are tailored to address three unique challenges of living the military lifestyle: relocations; absences, which is inclusive of deployments and training; and transitions - transitions into the military life and military-to-civilian life. Our services are vetted through the lens of these three challenges. We do not duplicate services, but rather navigate and connect families to existing services within the community. We foster partnerships and cultivate relationships with CAF and community agencies.

We apply a family-centred approach, as we recognize each military family has their own unique situation, and we allocate our resources to meet their unique challenges. We remain current on Canadian military family research and solicit ongoing feedback from families. This ensures that we remain relevant, offering services that best meet their needs in ways that work best for them.

Our services are available in person, virtually, or by phone. We have a 24-hour information line unique to our MFRC, answered by a live person who can implement urgent support. We feel this is a necessary service in Halifax due to the high operational tempo of the Canadian Armed Forces here.

In a broad sense, our services include: mental health and well-being; family counsellors; information and referral; youth engagement and school outreach; navigation support, including navigating through provincial systems; military lifestyle education; connection programs, including those for Francophones; community engagement, outreach and events; six short-term accommodations; emergency family care assistance; education and advocacy about the military family experience; career and employment counselling; veteran family program; and financial resources.

CAF families are faced with the same challenges as other Canadians, but their situations may be compounded by relocation, absences, and transitions. When it comes to the impact of the cost of living, like other families, there could be one situation that tips a family into financial stress or hardship, such as the holiday season, maybe a fuel bill, legal costs of family breakdown or custody, or maybe even a vehicle that breaks down.

Relocation can compound a financial situation because when a CAF family is posted to Nova Scotia, the CAF member is required to report for duty, sometimes immediately. This makes securing housing and spousal employment more urgent. This sense of urgency can impact their options or place families in financial stress, such as purchasing a home outside their affordability range or purchasing a home before the spouse has secured employment, or is even aware of the job market. It is not unusual for a spouse

to expect their employment in Nova Scotia will be a similar pay in salary, only to discover that it may be actually \$20,000 less than in their outgoing province.

Relocations affect continuity of spousal employment, which in turn affects the family's income. Factors such as not being able to build seniority can limit promotional opportunity to earn more income, or the cost of recertification in a new province. Sixty per cent of military spouses today have post-secondary education. We are observing a trend over the last few years of career transition with spouses versus spouses who, in the past, would have looked to secure a job simply to get them through to their next posting.

From a financial literacy perspective, the CAF member may not be the highest income earner in a household. This may or may not be a consideration in accepting a posting or in the spouse accompanying them on that posting. Imposed restriction is when a member moves without their family. This has its own challenges, impacting family togetherness for a supportive unit. Families are considering this more due to the housing costs, among other factors such as the grade levels of their children. Research in 2018 of Canadian military families showed adolescents are the most impacted by relocation.

Other financial considerations include the cost of health and intervention services for children with special needs. Services vary by province, and CAF families continually restart these services with every move. Elder care supports and services - dependent parents are the new trend that we are now observing. Many CAF families have parents living in the home with them or are responsible for the care of their elder parent, which is affecting their relocation choices.

Some financial resources our MFRCs offer include grocery cards, gas cards, those types of financial resources to address smaller gaps. Six short-term fully furnished apartments - they are not a housing solution. They are short-term stays for things like hospital treatments, gender-based violence, a parent living outside of Nova Scotia who's perhaps coming to visit, an ill or injured member in the hospital - it could be for if your home is unsuitable for a period of time due to fire, flood, et cetera. When the families stay in our short-term accommodations, they do not have to incur the high costs of hotel stays or restaurants or those kinds of things.

Veteran Farm Project partnership is one of the financial resources we had available this year. The Veteran Farm Project provided fresh boxes of food to families who could pick up at our MFRC. Our Op Dasher program is our financial support during the holidays program, and the usage doubled in 2022.

Our latest initiative is our Community Pantry, which we stood up on November 24<sup>th</sup>. It was stocked with food items and personal items, and it will evolve based on the emerging feedback on gaps that we see and hear from families. This service is military families supporting each other with a "take something, leave something" approach to provide an anonymous service.

Some of our financial partners include Together We Stand Foundation, which helps support us with grocery gift cards; Support Our Troops, which provides larger funding needs and funding for special needs supports for families; and SISIP Financial, a CAF resource offering financial counselling, literacy, and loans.

[2:15 p.m.]

Military family life also has many positives. Research shows high rates of resilience among spouses who adapt quickly to relocations. Many families embrace postings as an adventure with new opportunities. MFRCs exist to support families to mitigate the inherent challenges of the lifestyle. Family readiness equals CAF operational readiness. You cannot have one without the other. The family having the resources to remain a stable family unit and build resilience is an essential consideration for recruitment and retention of the Canadian Armed Forces.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Hopkins.

Ms. Fleck or Mr. Hood, do you have any opening remarks? Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: I apologize - I wrote these great notes and they're sitting on my desk in Dartmouth, so I'm going by memory. I just finished vacation yesterday, so please bear with me.

Good afternoon and thank you very much. Shelley, that was so well said. You covered a lot of the points that I was going to mention. I just want to say that not only in my job as the Director of Emergency Management for HRM - which obviously covers almost half of the province - but I've also worn a green uniform for 38 years, so I've been posted. I've been through all the things that Shelley talks about. My husband is still serving. My youngest son is now in the Regular Force as an officer doing university, so this is lived experience and then some.

What I would like to say is that people are turning down postings to Halifax. They are releasing from the Canadian Armed Forces because when they look at the prices online or are looking to get a family doctor if they have a special needs medical situation, they know that they can't get a doctor and they can't find a place to live. That's number one. Number two is that we have active serving Regular Force members who are still couch surfing who were posted here in the Summer who cannot find a place to live. They are regularly now going to food banks. The Op Dasher program that Shelley talked about - I've sent more people there this year than I have in 38 years.

People cannot afford to live here. They cannot secure housing. They cannot secure a rental. People are trying their best because they have no choice but to show up for work, as Shelley said, so they are living in Truro, in the Valley, toward Cape Breton. They are



finding anything that they can that's affordable, but nothing is in Halifax or the HRM area as a whole.

Again, I mentioned the food banks. People are coming to work hungry. Young soldiers are coming to work hungry, and leaders are trying to feed them as best they can, using their own money. I've personally had to give out five Christmas dinner boxes so far on top of the Op Dasher program, just because people are struggling just to put Christmas dinner on the table for their families.

In closing, I would just like to say it's heartbreaking that these are the people - currently their primary job is to defend our country and they can't afford to live here. Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Fleck, and thank you for your service.

Mr. Hood, do you have any opening remarks you'd like to make?

CRAIG HOOD: Sure, I'll make a quick one.

Ladies and gentlemen, people of the committee, I've served in the military for 33 and a half years. I just retired in September and rolled into this role as the Executive Director of Nova Scotia Nunavut Command of the Royal Canadian Legion. The Royal Canadian Legion is committed to serving veterans and CAF members along with their families. That includes the RCMP as well.

The Legion often responds to the needs of veterans and their families through benevolence. Over the past couple of years, we've been seeing a rise in the use of our benevolent funds to a point where I'm starting to look at creative ways to obtain more benevolent funds to support those veterans.

When I was appointed to speak here, I did a deep dive on this topic. What I came across was some startling information on serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces being posted here: living rough in tents, living out of their vehicles, couch surfing, engaging in interpersonal relationships for the purposes of securing housing - which oftentimes puts them as victims to domestic violence. This is quite a serious epidemic, if you want to call it, and it needs to be tackled. We need to look at ways to holistically come together in the various organizations that we all belong to, to come up with new and creative ways to support those who defend us.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Hood. Thank you for your service and congratulations on your new role.

We will now enter into our question-and-answer period with questions put forward by our committee members to you. We will go in a 20-20-20 method where each caucus

will get 20 minutes to ask you questions. We'll keep track of it. We have to stick to the time, so if you are in the middle of answering a question and I do call, "Order," it's not that I'm being rude, it's just that we have to stay on the track of giving equal representation for our caucuses here.

We will begin our question period now with the Liberal caucus. Just a reminder to please wait until you're recognized before you speak and the red light is on. We'll begin with MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: If I may suggest, my initial questions I'd like responses posed directly from our team at the far right of the table, Ms. Hopkins, Ms. Fleck, and Mr. Hood. Then if our folks from the government departments want to weigh in on some of the things that they're doing, I'd appreciate that primary and secondary commentary to respond.

We're approaching our third budget under the new government without an increase to income assistance rates. I'm wondering if our folks from the MFRC, Ms. Fleck - we now have a vulnerable persons registry that's useful in terms of identifying people who are going through a difficult period - and Mr. Hood, could you weigh in on some of the conversations that you've been having with the people whom you serve and how it relates specifically to the lack of increases from the income assistance program here in Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: Who would like to take a stab at that starting out here? Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: I would say it really has no impact. The issue is that Canadian Forces members are over the threshold for income assistance, so they don't qualify. Again, as Ms. Hopkins said, when people come here, most times they lose an entire income as a working married couple. They lose that income. Then again, all of the increased expenses - child care, or if they have a child in university in another place, they're paying those fees, living in another province - all of those family dynamics that come into play with a military family, but income assistance does not really apply or affect those.

BEN JESSOME: Fair enough. I run into a similar dynamic in the constituency I represent where a number of households fall outside of that catchment for income assistance rates. They run into situations where a family member loses a job and they still are in a spot where they're making money, but they have lost that budgeted amount for the household, which can make it a challenge.

Perhaps I'll ask Mr. Hood to expand a little bit on some of the commentary he made with respect to serving military men and women living rough, being forced into relationships or to maintain relationships because they have nowhere to go, and couch surfing. I'm hearing this doesn't necessarily land them in the income assistance program in terms of their ability to access that program. What are they expected to do at this point?

What are they communicating are their greatest challenges to getting beyond that situation?

CRAIG HOOD: It is extremely challenging for them, and people are making very difficult choices right now. One is whether or not to continue pursuing a life in the Canadian Armed Forces because of the challenges they face with the postings. I've talked to various serving members, both inside and outside of my military career. With the personnel selection officers, for example, they're hearing from members that they do not want to be posted. They are settled where they are. They don't want to leave because their spouse or their partners have good jobs where they are. Their children are well embedded into the school system. To come to a place where there is no easy way to find residence - and I can attest to that, being posted to Nova Scotia just over two years ago - the challenges that come with trying to secure housing here.

What I'm seeing is that for a lot of those who do get themselves into homes, is that we are supporting them with financial assistance, whether that be to top off their oil or help pay an electrical bill - whatever it is just to get them from one paycheck to the next, and those are the best-case scenarios.

BEN JESSOME: It sounds like you're in a situation where - I mean, I try to empathise with the situation. It's not me in those shoes, so I say this respectfully. It has to be difficult, not being able to budget for the household expenses and having to lean on whatever one-off supports may or may not be available at the time. We've heard from other organizations that have come into this committee. For context, I've sat on this committee for 10 years now. We hear about the challenges associated with respect to recruitment and retention in the Canadian Armed Forces. Hearing that folks are reluctant to move to Halifax in any context, but certainly in the context of joining our local complement of serving military - we're amongst the largest cohorts in the nation, so that's difficult to hear.

From a spousal employment perspective, how challenging - how many examples of barriers with respect to credentialling or things that make it difficult for a spouse to move with the serving partner? How often do you see that come up, and what sorts of situations or perhaps professions do you run into where that's most prevalent?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hopkins, I believe you'd like to answer that?

SHELLEY HOPKINS: Yes, I can answer that. What we see is oftentimes, spouses are actually under employed here in Nova Scotia. As I said, 60 per cent have post-secondary education. It depends on the job that they're needing, and the job market that's available. Administrative jobs, anything right now in health care that's in a support role, they're going to be able to be employed in those, but it depends. It depends on the market. Then if you need to be employed because you need to be a second-income family, which most Canadians do now, Canadian Armed Forces is the same sometimes.

Those statistics are hard to say - what the most jobs are that they're accessing or the jobs that they're taking. They may not be taking them because that's their field of work. They might be taking them because that's what's available and we need a second income. What we're noticing is that they are under-employed most of the time. Did that answer all your questions?

[2:30 p.m.]

ERICA FLECK: What I personally have seen is that one of the biggest challenges is schoolteachers in Nova Scotia. A lot of military members are married to schoolteachers. Years ago, it was an easy bounce from province to province - everybody needed teachers and with experience. But I would say that in the last 10 years at least, teachers coming to Nova Scotia who are married to CAF members have not been able to secure a full-time teaching position. They go on the wait-list as respite or substitutes, and it takes them years. By the time they roll into getting a job, then it's time to move again. They're taking many underpaid positions just to be able to keep the family afloat.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hopkins, you had your hand up.

SHELLEY HOPKINS: I would also add with respect to recertification and accreditation, it's definitely a challenge. One of the things that we try to do is really reach the family before they relocate, so that they can get those processes under way if they have to do a recertification or an accreditation.

Teachers are a great example. That's an absolute challenge. The provincial barriers across the country when - you could be in the Air Force, for example. You're in the West, you're in the North, you're in the East, you're in Central. Every two years, you're posted. You're lagged behind even being able to work within your field because of the accreditation process. You might be a year into that posting, and then leaving in another year to a year and a half, and you just started to work because of the accreditation and recertification process. It's an absolute challenge and a barrier that we've been saying for years has to be addressed.

BEN JESSOME: I'd just like to ask Deputy Minister MacKenzie and Mr. Eisan to weigh in on the work that they've been doing in collaboration with the Seamless Canada group, and perhaps a similar request for information - the different professions that you run into that are coming up most often and, generally speaking, some of the work that you've been undertaking more recently, please and thank you.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister MacKenzie.

DANA MACKENZIE: The work with the Seamless Canada Steering Committee is one of the functions that our department, under the leadership of Minister Adams, engages in with respect to attempting to assist and help navigate on this issue of spousal

employment. I'll defer to my colleague, Mr. Eisan, because he works quite closely - and I'm sure the committee might remember him from June 2023 - to talk more about how Seamless Canada and our participation in it works.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Eisan.

DARRYL EISAN: As the deputy minister pointed out, with respect to Seamless Canada, spousal employment is one of the three priority areas for the Seamless Canada Steering Committee. As I told the committee in June earlier this year, when we provided an update with respect to Seamless Canada and the work that has been ongoing, we have been actively involved at the Seamless Canada table, and certainly as it relates to the spousal employment file. We will probably continue that work between now and the next meeting of Seamless Canada, which is scheduled for the Spring of 2024.

The steering committee just met two and a half weeks ago as well. We received an update from officials with respect to the work. As my deputy minister pointed out in her opening comments, we work very closely with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration on the Seamless Canada file.

BEN JESSOME: I do want to state for the record that I'll be requesting an update again this committee meeting. I've made several motions at this committee to try to expand the scope of our committee to include the work of Seamless Canada and that general effort. I don't think we've landed specifically on what the expansion would entail. The government has suggested that they are interested in doing so, but has yet to provide any sort of context as to how we'd bring that conversation more intentionally to this public forum.

As I stated previously, I've been on the committee for 10 years, as a former member of the government and working directly alongside Mr. Eisan at the first inaugural Seamless Canada meeting. It's made a home for me. It's become a priority for me for the last several years. I hope that this committee will make good on their commitment to take on a reinvigorated, updated mandate to enhance the work that we do as a provincial government.

A lot of the work that we do at this committee leans on our federal counterparts rather than, from my perspective, taking a proactive approach to how we use the provincial jurisdiction to support our serving and past military members. How are we doing for time? Do you want to jump in?

THE CHAIR: The Liberal caucus has 5 minutes and 25 seconds. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to touch on a couple of things in the 5 minutes and 25 seconds that I have. There's an ongoing housing and homelessness crisis in the province and in the city. We heard that in opening testimony a few weeks ago at the Human

Resources Committee, which I sat on at the time as well. We heard from the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia that at that point in time, there were just over a thousand people - I think 1,068 people - in HRM alone experiencing homelessness, and probably hundreds more outside of the city as well.

Perhaps this would be a question for Deputy Minister MacKinnon, I assume. Do we have any sense of how many of those people are either actively serving veterans or retired members of the Armed Forces? Do we have that data at all?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister MacKinnon.

MELISSA MACKINNON: We were just discussing this. Maybe I'll defer to Ms. Fleck for this data, if you don't mind. We discussed it kind of prior to make sure we had that info.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: To MLA Clark, there are approximately 40 people who are considered unhoused veterans. My apologies, but that number is not valid. That is living rough, completely without a home. There are hundreds - again, we were discussing this beforehand - who are precariously housed, whether that be couch surfing or, again, forming a relationship to try to find a place or six people living in a one-bedroom apartment, which is happening. We - I say "we" as in the community - do not consider them to be with stable housing.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate that. My assumption would be that - and this is true for all people, of course, but I think for serving members in particular, given the demands of the job, which is not the case for most jobs where you have to move around quite often and you're in and out of places much more often than other people would be - you're at an increased risk of falling into these situations, especially when we're dealing with a housing market in HRM where the vacancy rate is 1 per cent, if you're lucky. In some places it's less than that, which is hard to believe, but it's true.

I know this is a big question, but what are the steps we can take, particularly as it relates to veterans, to kind of turn that tide a little bit? Is there anything unique to the veteran experience that we might be able to use to help them particularly? Beyond, of course, more housing, which is the panacea for everybody, is there anything that we can do for veterans in particular that would help them?

ERICA FLECK: Just off the top of my head - and I'm sure Ms. Hopkins may have more to add - I would say preferred housing, I'll call it: bumping them up on a wait-list for affordable housing, giving them preferential treatment, we'll say, when we know that they're coming to Nova Scotia. They get sometimes six months' or sometimes three

months' notice. Sometimes it's shorter. They come here, and they have five days to find a place to live. That's the maximum that they have.

When you arrive in a new place, you get five days to either buy or find a rental, whatever. Obviously, it's very challenging. Most people can't afford to buy a house here. Like you said, the 1 per cent rate is just out of their price range anyway. To find a long-term rental - a minimum three-year lease, or it could be longer - to be able to work with the MFRC or different organizations, to be able to put them as a priority, which could be validated very easily when they get their posting message, that would certainly help a lot.

BRAEDON CLARK: As you say, five days is an incredibly short period of time to figure out where you're going to live, no matter what the situation. I'm wondering - and I'm not sure who would know this answer - what is the general time frame between notification of a posting and then actually being on the ground in a place? What kind of time frame are we looking at between those two?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fleck with 30 seconds.

ERICA FLECK: Very quickly, generally you get your message - messages will start coming in February or March, and then you need to be in place by July or August. You have a five-day window somewhere in there to book what's called your house-hunting trip where you come down and secure your living arrangements.

THE CHAIR: That concludes the first round for the Liberal caucus.

We will now move to the NDP caucus. MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm very curious about a lot of things, but I'm also in a space where we need to be looking for solutions. I know that everyone here is about helping and doing the work that needs to be done. But I just want to wrap my head around exactly how we can do that and how this is going to work for folks - especially for our veterans who have served our country and who have done tremendous work to continue to keep us safe and free.

My question is for the Department of Community Services. I'm just curious to know what role DCS plays with supporting military families and veterans. You mentioned there was a bit of programming that is able. I'd like to know that.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister MacKinnon, we'll start with you, and if you feel you need to pass it on to anybody in your department, feel free.

MELISSA MACKINNON: This is very helpful for me, as a new deputy minister in the role, to hear some of these concerns as I explore the art of the possible within the department. It's not, as I said, part of our mandate necessarily, but certainly some of what

Ms. Hopkins was speaking to in what the military Family Resource Centres play, we also can provide through our Family Resource Centres - some of the same supports. Anyone who goes into some of these centres - there are 26 of them across the province - can access those supports.

If I could, I would ask Tracy Embrett just to talk about some of that programming that's accessible.

TRACY EMBRETT: Child and family well-being, prevention, and early intervention programs are delivered in communities across Nova Scotia by community-based organizations who are well positioned to build trusting relationships with youth, family, and other community members - very much grassroots programming and community involvement.

THE CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms. Embrett? Could I please ask you to lean closer to the microphone? I'm being told they're having a hard time hearing you. Thank you, I appreciate that.

TRACY EMBRETT: Certainly, thank you. No worries. I don't hear that very often. (Laughter)

The best way to protect children, youth, and families. Our mandate is under the Children and Family Services Act, which is risk of abuse or neglect for children. However, the prevention piece and early intervention piece is significant to mitigate any concerns with families.

We have continued to invest in community-based programs. As our deputy minister has just referenced, we have 26 Family Resource Centres across the province, and a number of other service providers who provide supports to anybody in community. It doesn't matter; they're not income tested, they're not means tested, needs tested. It's just whatever is available when a family comes to the attention of one of these community programs. They could be referred - thinking about how we could work with the military Family Resource Centre is if there is a location that is not close to where services are offered through our colleague's Family Resource Centre.

Some of the programs are a parenting journey, which is a goal-based home visitation program for families experiencing complex social, emotional, and family challenges. That is home visitors who go out to meet with families in their homes or in other locations to provide support they need to build skills and support networks based on their own goals, strengths, and priorities.

We also have Strengthening Fathers program, which has been previously known as Men's Intervention Program. It's not a family-focused name. Strengthening Fathers supports fathers who have used family violence or are at risk of using family violence in



their home. The program supports safety and wellbeing for fathers and their children, partners, and other family members, really looking at the strength of a family and trying to keep that family together. Obviously, when needed, we'll also make referrals to ensure children and spouses are kept safe.

[2:45 p.m.]

We also have Fatherhood Matters, which is another approach to dads, which is a parenting support. It's accessible, safe, and appropriate to the needs and challenges experienced by fathers, their children, and families. Services and supports that are unique to community, unique to individual circumstances, and they include parenting support groups, interactive activities, workshops, drop-ins, one-on-one supports, and specific cultural supports as well.

The family resource programs have a number of offerings to strengthen families. There's community-family peer support throughout the province. We have cultural connections; we have four locations in Nova Scotia that focus on cultural connections. They're located in Kentville, HRM, New Glasgow, and Halifax. What they do is they make sure if someone identifies as being Indigenous or of African descent, that wherever their community is and wherever they're living, that there are appropriate cultural supports for them. The cultural connections program will work with the community service providers in someone's town or area where they live, and make sure that there's an appropriate lens put on the services and supports offered.

We also fund and support youth outreach programs to support youth, to achieve social, educational, economic, and health outcomes. It's very important work. It's very holistic and focuses on healthy relationships - again, cultural and personal identity, and community involvement as well.

We have Youth Outreach Plus which is specific to youth who are transitioning to adulthood, so that would be specific to children in care, and we also have programs like A Place to Belong, which is a program offered throughout Nova Scotia through the Family Resource Centres. It's a positive environment for children and youth aged 5 to 18 to build relationships, learn how to build relationships, practice how to build relationships, experience cultural learnings and teachings, and to develop confidence and life skills.

On top of our defined programs, we also support with needs that a lot of organizations do: oil, fuel, home heating bills, food security, diapers, formula. Whatever a family may need, we will support that through our Family Resource Centres.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm actually very well versed in programming. I did programming myself, so I'm really glad to hear that there is continual programming.

My thought, though, about that is: Is there sustainable funding for these Family Resource Centres that is not just year-by-year? As well, is funding available or funds attached to some of those other programs where we know that the cost of living is high? There's a high cost in housing. Is there a way for some of those things - and I don't mean to say it to put all of that work onto the resource centres because we as a government have a responsibility, but I also want to know: What could we be doing as a government to make sure that folks, especially veterans in particular, are able to not have to access as much? You know, the food banks or - I mean, I don't even know if they'll be able to have a housing outreach worker because they don't fall within the income bracket.

I say this because it is available to those folks who need it, absolutely, as a Family Resource Centre. But for those folks who make a certain income, what type of funding is available to help them through this struggling time - help them through housing, help them through the cost of living and food and such? I'm just curious to know how veterans fit in that bracket.

THE CHAIR: I'll direct that back to you again, Ms. Embrett, if you'd like?

TRACY EMBRETT: With the child and family wellbeing program, the focus really is on children and families as a group, and how we can support the adults in a family to be strong and resilient with their children. Your question around housing support - these programs and, as you likely know, the parenting support programs do not support for funding housing, but definitely for the financial needs in real time. There has been an increase year-over-year in funding, a significant increase in prevention and early intervention in Nova Scotia.

We just recently finished, in 2022-23, the implementation of an increase of \$11 million. It was over three years in prevention and early intervention. In the 2023-24 budget, we also received a \$7.8 million investment to enhance and expand programs. A big portion of that is for youth transitioning into adulthood, which would be indirect to the topic of discussion today because this is focusing on children in care and children receiving youth services.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister MacKinnon, I believe you want to speak.

MELISSA MACKINNON: Just to add to that, one priority for us as a department is - whoever comes into the department, we're often meeting them at their worst moments - we want to try to do the best that we can to help navigate those supports. Our folks obviously have very close connections to housing support workers and certainly direct connections to our colleagues at the city. Very helpful to navigate those programs for members of the military - whoever comes into the system - to help connect to those programs.

I just wanted to mention that a couple of weeks ago, we were approved to roll out some additional food security funding that will go out in January and February, an additional \$5 million. Some of that will go to Family Resource Centres as well. In my previous role as an associate deputy minister at the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, any time I can plug some of their community food programs - because they're able to do some unique partnerships potentially with military families, community groups specifically serving them - I think there are probably some takeaways in terms of the art of the possible there. They may have some projects under way already.

SUZY HANSEN: Another question that I have, because it was discussed earlier, is about housing. It's always a challenge. We know that even just to relocate as non-military, is really such a challenge. I'm curious to know if there are any thoughts - probably from this end of the table - on what we could be doing better or if there's something that stands out that we could be utilizing as government to be able to help military families and veterans.

I'll use an example: Homes for Heroes. That was mentioned last year when I sat at this table. Yet there has been no talk about something where we're using specific funding for military families and veterans - because this is a need, and we know that it is. I'm just curious to know if there are any solutions, any thoughts - something that we could probably take back and apply when we sit at some point.

THE CHAIR: I've got a lot of people looking at each other. A hand would be great to know. Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: Years ago, when I first joined the military, the biggest support was having military housing. When you get to a new place and military housing was available, not only was there something there that you knew you could rely on, but you also have that built-in sense of community. For military members, when you move around and around, and you uproot your children, and you're going to a new city, province, neighbourhood, that is a huge stress relief - that you can talk to your own kind, we'll say, that you can bond very quickly. The kids bond very quickly because you move around, and you have that lived experience.

Years ago, the federal government, through whatever housing is called now . . .

SHELLEY HOPKINS: Canadian Forces Housing.

ERICA FLECK: Yes, that one - CFHA. They sold off the majority of housing, so it's mainly all gone. There are two small spots left - a few in Shearwater and a few in Halifax, but completely different. The Halifax side is apartments, and the Shearwater side is housing, but again the wait-lists are very long. People can't get to them. By the time one becomes available for them, then it's time to move on.

That would be the biggest recommendation I could ever make: more military housing for people coming here. It's stable, it's available, but again, it's that sense of community for people as well.

SUZY HANSEN: Staying on that note of military housing, when we talk about recruitment and retention, ideally, is there a number that you would like to have recruited, or should be recruited every year, or that is needed here in our area? Are we filling that need? If not, is it because of those factors?

ERICA FLECK: That's a very challenging question. I will say that in my last military role, one of them was in charge of attraction, retention, and recruiting for the four Atlantic Provinces.

Canadian Armed Forces overall, I believe right now we're short about 26,000 people - in the Army, sorry. I don't think that's including the Navy and the Air Force. Recruitment numbers are down. People don't want to move around anymore. From a retention standpoint, people are leaving earlier because they don't want to move as often, because they know places like Nova Scotia - again, the highest tax rate in Canada. Housing is unavailable. They can't afford to sell their house and then buy a new one. Again, the doctor shortage and access to health care, child care - it increases the stress level. If you have an operational stress injury - some people call it post-traumatic stress disorder. All of those factors are exacerbated when you start moving people around.

Retention is an issue depending on where you are, depending on where you're sending them. Recruitment is another issue based on - it's Army/Navy/Air Force. The Navy goes east coast or west coast, generally. The Army could be anywhere, and the same with the Air Force. It tends to go all across Canada.

I could sit here for three hours and answer your question, which would never fully get answered. It's ugly and complicated.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Hood, with about two minutes and 18 seconds.

CRAIG HOOD: I'll take 18. Looking at the housing situation with the personnel married quarters here in Nova Scotia, the wait-list that we're seeing is approximately 65 for the Halifax-Shearwater area, and 20 for the Greenwood area. Those are the two primary areas. On its own, that doesn't sound like a big number, but it's a big number. That's 85 families overall who are waiting for accommodations.

To go back to what Ms. Fleck said, 25 years ago when CFHA took on the housing for military, the treasury board mandated that the housing would be cut in half at least. At that time, it made sense because the housing market was very good. It was very robust. In fact, more military members were living on the economy than in the PMQs. So when the number-crunchers looked at it, they said: Well, they're living on the economy - we don't

need all these houses, so let's start cutting. Nobody saw COVID. Nobody saw all the things that came up to this point that led us to the situation that we're in.

[3:00 p.m.]

The primary function of the Canadian Armed Forces or any military force should be operational capability - the ability to basically pack up, move, and fight wherever they need to go at a moment's notice. The military cannot be worried about where their family is going to be living, and what they're going to be doing when they leave.

There's your retention problem right there. When there are more questions than answers, people will go elsewhere.

SUZY HANSEN: I just want to say thank you. I am grateful to be the MLA for Halifax Needham, who has a large population of military families. I understand what that means. We have to do better.

THE CHAIR: That concludes the NDP round of questioning. We'll now move to the PC caucus for 20 minutes of questions.

MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: That 20 minutes was for the caucus, not just for me, correct?

THE CHAIR: I'll let you guys fight that out. MLA Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you very much for being here today. Ms. Fleck, when you talked about sense of community, being brought up in a military family and moving from place to place, there was certainly that sense of community as dependents and as families. When you had to move, you knew that likely you're going to find somebody you've already been posted with. That was good. That provided some sanity, at least for the kids. I can tell you that some kids thrived on that and blossomed; others, not so much, as you know.

To hear you talk about the challenges today - I know going back at that point in time when we lived in PMQs and in the general public, it was always different for the military families. Unless you've experienced that, it's hard to explain that sense of camaraderie, that sense of belonging - regardless. I want to thank you for your service here today. I want to thank you for your advocacy, providing information and support to the current and former serving members.

I want to just comment on a couple of things and then ask a few questions if I might, so I don't have to arm wrestle these guys to my right here. I lived in Wallis Heights, and it's

no longer PMQs. Shannon Park and Wallis Heights, disappeared. A lot of military families in the late 1960s, early 1970s built out in Sackville, Cole Harbour - Sackville in particular. One of the largest communities built in Nova Scotia and in Canada, and it basically was military-driven. Sense of community moved from the base, PMQs, to a community. To this day we see that power where we live.

I've seen a number of my colleagues who would have been dependents, and now have grandchildren. But our parents are in their 80s and 90s, and have had difficulty with pensions, difficulty meeting the cost of living, own their own homes, find that they have to sell their homes or the children take it and move in with children. My question is around this. Those veterans who are out there, what types of programs, information, support, advocacy do you do with the different governments, whether it's provincial, federal, or municipal?

Ms. Hopkins, I'll probably direct this to you, if I might. I've been to your centre when I was a municipal councillor. I know the great work that's done. Thank you for that: being a not-for-profit organization out there, to do this out of your hearts - really big hearts - to help those in need in this particular community.

How do you engage and advocate for veterans? I just want to focus on veterans for a second. Mr. Hood, maybe you can comment on this too, as the Legion. How do you advocate for veterans with the various orders of government today to get some of the things - to get our other guests here to initiate things or to look at things, perhaps? Priority was mentioned - either in a priority fashion or a complete, wraparound type of engagement?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hopkins.

SHELLEY HOPKINS: You actually said that: wraparound service. That's one of the things that we try to do. Our goal is really to support the veteran family member. There are so many agencies for the veteran - one here at the table today. One of the primary things that we do through the Veteran Family Program is we have a Veteran Family Program navigator. She's aware of all of the resources in the community and across Nova Scotia, which is probably close to about 200 different types of agencies that support veterans, and relationships with our transition centres. That is the military agency that makes sure that medically released veterans are transitioned with all the supports that they need for the release process. Now just newly in Halifax, they have launched, just last year - all veterans now go through the transition centre, so that everybody makes sure that they're aware of those supports.

We're connected with the transition centre, with having a staff member co-located within MFRC and at the transition centre. We make sure that when a veteran is releasing and coming through the transition, which now is a requirement, we're connecting with that family member to make sure that they're aware of the services of the MFRC, and they're aware of different services in Nova Scotia.

Sorry, what was the other part of your question?

STEVE CRAIG: The support of the veterans is one thing - the advocacy part with the different orders of government, whether it be municipal, provincial, or federal.

SHELLEY HOPKINS: Just in the last two months, we've met with the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada and we've met with the ombudsman for Veterans Affairs. It is very much about staying connected and making sure people are aware of the veteran family experience. One of the greatest challenges we have at the Military Family Resource Centre, and a big perception of everyone across the country, is that we have access to military and veteran families, that Military Family Resource Centres would get a list of every family that's posted, would get a list of every family member who's in the Canadian Armed Forces, and would get a list of everybody who's deployed and when they're deployed.

That is not the case.

We are an optional service. We are funded to provide a mandated service to military families and to veteran families, but we don't know who they are or where they are unless we can connect with them directly to have them fill out family contact information, and then we can get to them.

It is imperative that we are connected with every agency we possibly can to make sure that they know about the Military Family Resource Centre, so that they can also refer back to us if a veteran family or military family comes into one of their agencies or accesses one of their resources. The Military Family Resource Centre spoke about the family resource centre programs. Yes, those are great, and we have some partnerships with other ones in the community, Sackville being one example. Even in the Truro community, there's a family resource centre that we're connected with, and they do serve those families in those communities.

But there are some services specifically that the Military Family Resource Centre has available to any family, regardless of where they're living in Nova Scotia that another family resource centre just wouldn't have those particular services. Again, we see things through the lens of relocation, absences, and transitions - and our resources directly support those things.

For us, it's crucial to constantly be doing education and advocacy at the government level, at the community level, even with families themselves to help them understand that they can access these services - what services are available to them, and then the different ways that they can do that. But they need to connect with us. The member is always the gatekeeper for us, so we're constantly trying to find ways to get to the member to educate and get access to the family.

THE CHAIR: I believe Mr. Hood would like to respond as well.

CRAIG HOOD: The Royal Canadian Legion operates on multiple tiers. We've got Royal Canadian Legion Dominion Command, which operates out of Ottawa. They advocate for veterans on a national and federal level. Then beneath that you have your commands at a provincial level. For us, it's provincial and territorial, as we also hold a couple of branches in Nunavut.

Here in Nova Scotia, we have 100 Legion branches across the province and roughly just over 16,000 members. With that, we have the outreach to the communities to reach out to veterans to provide more intimate care, whether it's Meals on Wheels programs or whatever, to help address immediate or personal needs, to grander-scale veteran outreach programs, which introduce or bring back purpose - what I call service after service - to re-engage veterans, and get them involved in community activities. There could be more coming on that.

From the veteran homelessness perspective, we do have a benevolent fund that's partially funded through the Poppy Trust Fund, but also comes from external donations. We use that to support our veterans in more immediate ways. As I mentioned before, that could come in the ways of providing - I've sent several fuel trucks out over the past month and a half to veterans' homes to top up their oil to make sure they're good for Christmas. I've actually got an elderly lady, the widow of a veteran, whom I'll be dropping a turkey off for, probably on Thursday. That's just the kind of stuff that we do on a very low-scale level.

The big thing is bringing dignity back into their lives because when we all served, we served a very high purpose. When we leave that high purpose and enter the private life, it can be difficult to find our footing, and it could be very difficult to find purpose again. Our objectives are to help find that purpose again.

STEVE CRAIG: Ms. Hopkins, when you said that people would generally think that you had all the contact information, and you said you didn't, that really caught me by surprise. Thank you for that. I think it's a lesson for all of us to know that we have to engage with you versus the other way around. You've got some abilities there and capabilities to do certain things. However, if you don't know there's a problem, you don't know there's a problem. I think that's a lesson for all of us, to certainly engage, whether it's municipal - and I know Ms. Fleck will do that for sure. I know our own Province will do that as well.

Mr. Hood, you talked about the transition. You've recently gone through the transition. I know my father went through the transition. I've seen many, many members go from the transition of something that was chain of command supported. I'm not going to get into salaries, especially at the lower ranks, and the suitability of that. That's a whole different discussion for a whole different area.



That transition, in the process - I'm not talking about necessarily medical release. You've done your 30-some-odd years, and you are now going to transition. You've got your family who's used to the military life, you've got yourselves who are used to the military life. What sort of transition plan is available to those who are moving into either full retirement - which a military member doesn't usually do, they either go into another employment or they go into a volunteer capacity because you like that structure, in my experience anyway. Maybe it's not everybody.

What types of programs are out there that you're aware of? Again, I'm going to come back to advocacy time and time again because advocacy with orders of government is so important in everything we do, and also with the employer, the Canadian Armed Forces - doesn't matter which branch you're in, Navy, Army or Air Force.

What role do you see your organizations playing in helping in transition? Is that more of an informal role that you might have, or is it more formalized in that you have context as well to help with whoever is in charge of that release to make things happen?

Chair, probably all three would like to answer that. I don't know.

THE CHAIR: We'll begin with Mr. Hood, and then we'll go from there.

CRAIG HOOD: What was already mentioned is the transition centre. That transition centre's primary function is ensuring that military members transition effectively into veteran life. There's a whole bunch of programs, and steps, SCAN seminars, and career workshops and things that go on. Through VAC, there is re-education funding that if somebody wants to engage in a new career after a life of service, then they have those opportunities. That's at the grander scale. The Royal Canadian Legion has existed since 1926 to serve as a safe haven for veterans to help regain their footing after service.

What I'm seeing as a fairly contemporary veteran is that there's a growing desire for veterans to continue to serve in some different capacity. We're seeing that from the different types of organizations that are rising out there like Team Rubicon and other organizations that take advantage of the skill sets that veterans have, to repurpose them in a way and give meaning back to their life. I can say from a personal note, falling into this role as executive director for the Royal Canadian Legion has given me personally that sense of service after service, and a sense of purpose moving forward to help my fellow veterans move forward themselves. That's what we need to look at - ways to engage a veteran's community to get them homing in and capitalizing on those skill sets that we all have.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fleck, did you want to respond?

ERICA FLECK: This is a fantastic question, so thank you for asking it. Transitioning is the hardest thing that people will ever go through. I always say that I gave up my security blanket. It's really hard, because it's the only thing most people know -

fresh out of high school and then go to university, the military sends me there, they teach me how to speak terrible French and everything else. That's the only thing you've done for your entire adult life, and then one day it just stops - all the supports that go with that, the biggest challenge,

[3:15 p.m.]

I don't want to reiterate, but I will say that Veterans Affairs Canada and the transition centre, other federal programs that the CAF has done truly have really stepped up the game finally, after decades of being ignored. They really have truly improved the systems that are now available.

The biggest issue though is that people move back home, wherever that may be, generally after their final retirement. So they're trying to find that community again, and as Mr. Hood said, trying to find that sense of purpose. They generally reach out to their peers and friends that they've made over the years and ask: What do I do now? Again, Team Rubicon was mentioned. We had a lot of people with the fires and the floods. We had Team Rubicon here helping, for example, and they picked up all kinds of new members. People were saying, hey, this is really cool. Again, that sense of purpose.

They need to find that in the community that they've now settled in, which again is starting a new life all over, because you're now retired, you're moving back to wherever. It may not be home; it may be just somewhere that you lived that you fell in love with, but again, it's starting over.

SHELLEY HOPKINS: I think I'll just take a little bit of a different turn on that, rather than repeating what my great colleagues have said here. Because we're in the business of navigating families through systems - you talked about solution-focused - for us, we are uniquely positioned to hear family stories but also hear about the gaps in those systems. Sometimes it's not about more, it's about different. There are so many services that exist, but we're often working in silos in those services. There's not enough overlap. There's not a wraparound service around the family and around the member.

You think about the homeless veteran experience. When there's a release process, there's a lot more that - the root cause of homelessness, where's the wraparound service? What did we miss? What did we not look at in terms of making sure that when they transitioned out that they were going to have success, not only with housing but in all of the other areas that they needed that? Definitely, I agree the transition centres and the future trajectory of the next 10 years and what they're planning, I think will make some really great impacts. There are a lot of services, but often we don't know about them.

We lean a lot on the Legion for a variety of different things, their benevolent funds that Craig has mentioned a number of times today, and a lot of other great work that the Legions do - but people have no idea. There's no central place of people understanding

what the vast ranges of services available to veterans are. Right now, the MFRC seems to be filling that gap in terms of centralizing services through our navigation support with our Veteran Family Program. They know all the different services in the community - what types of funding veterans and families can tap into.

Sometimes there's so much, it's not about doing more. It's: can we just do different? Can we not work in silos?

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig, you have two minutes and 10 seconds.

STEVE CRAIG: Me or the caucus?

THE CHAIR: Your caucus has two minutes and five seconds.

STEVE CRAIG: I'll yield to one of my colleagues, so I don't get throttled after this meeting.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: When I sit on committees like this, I'm always impressed with the calibre of the people who are involved with the programs. This committee - I'm always impressed, 100 per cent, with the people who come in and talk about the jobs they're doing. So many challenges out there for everybody, and certainly for our veterans and their families. I'm extremely impressed with what you folks offer to try to get those problems solved and those challenges met. Thank you very much for that.

I'm probably going to get one question in anyway. To Ms. MacKenzie: How does your agency engage with and respond to the needs of veterans and their families in Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister MacKenzie with a minute to go.

DANA MACKENZIE: It is with a great deal of pride and commitment that Mr. Eisan's team connects with military families, and Minister Adams as well, who takes her work in terms of connecting and highlighting the role of military families in the province very seriously. She appears at countless events - not just to appear, but to actually make connections that on the ground can result in information flowing to people who are in those communities, so that we can do the connecting of the dots that is incumbent on us to do as government.

It is challenging because despite the federal government having full legislative and policy control over military matters and its affairs, we recognize the importance of that collaboration to connect those dots . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questioning for the PC caucus has been completed. There will be another round - a smaller, shorter round - and if you'd like maybe the caucus to finish that after the next round, feel free to do that. We'll give everybody seven minutes to go around each caucus, and then we'll end with closing statements.

MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Ms. Hopkins referenced the intention and importance of adding to the research that's out there with respect to military families. I'll pose a question to our friends in the government: Are there programs, some of which have been referenced today, that have a box to check or an identifier? For example, you see applications where an applicant is asked to identify as racially diverse or persons with a disability. Are there any programs that fall under your roofs that would have that identifier checkbox, whether it's military or veteran?

MELISSA MACKINNON: Not necessarily under Community Services. Although as I said, if someone volunteered that they were a member of a military family or a veteran, then we can help connect them to those programs. Certainly willing to, as a takeaway, get a better understanding across government of what those programs might be. Ms. Fleck or anyone, please chime in, but I'm really happy - that's a good takeaway for me to check in with my colleagues.

BEN JESSOME: Likewise, to Ms. Fleck: Does the Vulnerable Persons Registry at HRM have an identifier as a part of that program?

ERICA FLECK: The answer is no, we don't, but now I need to relook at why we didn't, which is ironic coming from me. To your point, I just whispered to Ms. Hopkins that - like the federal government does for public service jobs - why aren't we asking for that box-check from the Province and from the municipality for priority hires for veterans and military spouses? I think it's a fantastic takeaway. Thank you.

BEN JESSOME: A question for Deputy Minister MacKenzie and Mr. Eisan. You referenced the work that you're doing with respect to spousal employment and operating through a relationship with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. Have you had any specific correspondence, asks or interactions with any or a few credentialing bodies, regulatory bodies, the Nova Scotia Teachers College? I think we referenced here teaching as a profession that has trouble landing the plane when they show up. Can you report for the benefit of the committee any of the correspondence or work that you have done specific to interactions with these self-regulated professions or credentialing bodies here in Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister MacKenzie with three and a half minutes.

DANA MACKENZIE: I'll try not to take too long.

With respect to the credentialing question, it is something that hasn't been specifically raised with respect to military families or veterans. I do know that there are other - there used to be, and it's a good takeaway for us on the issue of checking the box. Historically, the Civil Service Act and the general civil service regulations had some provision related to identifying prior military service, which to my knowledge hasn't been changed, but we can check on that.

With respect to specific questions about specific professions like teachers or the ones that were spoken about today, I'm sure people are aware of the recent initiatives to ensure that the supply of teachers is made more consistent with respect to the expedited credentialing and programming through CBU, and those types of things. The general approach to dealing with the issues and the population are there, but with respect to dealing with those discrete issues that may arise within the community of military spouses or veterans, those are things that would transact on a more personal basis or a more one-off basis.

With respect to the connectivity that we try to do at the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs through our work under military relations - my colleague, Mr. Eisan, through his connections with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, would be trying to connect people in those ways so that those types of issues that are unique to an individual could be addressed through those types of connects that we're trying to do, whether it's through the registrar of teachers' credentials and that type of thing.

I'll hand the microphone to him, if there's any time left on the three minutes, to talk about how some of those connects happen through the work that we're doing with LSI with respect to Seamless Canada.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Eisan, the deputy minister has left you one minute and 10 seconds. (Laughter)

DARRYL EISAN: Thanks, deputy. What I would say in follow-up to my deputy minister's comments is that the good thing about the Seamless Canada table is that it is an organic table. It doesn't prevent provinces or territories from bringing issues to the table when issues come about. I know from our work with the Seamless Canada table that they are constantly engaging with military families to find out what the key issues are that military families are experiencing. Once those issues are brought to the table, they are discussed, as you know from your experience when you went to meetings in the past.

We will certainly take those, and work across government as a central agency at Intergovernmental Affairs to deal with our colleagues to address those issues, and see what can be done to go back to Seamless Canada and work with them. Certainly, we are engaged with them on a regular basis, and certainly when we work across government, not only in our own government but also . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes this round for the Liberals. We'll now move on to MLA Hansen - seven minutes.

[3:30 p.m.]

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you, Chair. You just take a breather. You'll be fine. We also mentioned that Veterans Affairs falls under our federal counterparts. We understand that, but we know provincially we also have a responsibility for those folks who are in need, who are our veterans.

You were mentioning that issues are discussed across at the Seamless Canada table, but I'm just curious to know - and MLA Craig had mentioned that advocacy is key, right? We need to make sure that they are a priority, that they're on a list to say: these are some major issues that we're experiencing in our province when it comes to housing, employment, health care, and all of the other pieces.

I would just like to know a lot more about how that process goes.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Eisan.

DARRYL EISAN: Just as a point of clarification, member, process at the Seamless Canada table?

SUZY HANSEN: Yes.

DARRYL EISAN: Okay. It's a federal-provincial table. You have two co-chairs - a federal co-chair and a provincial co-chair. Certainly, we're represented at the steering committee level by Minister Adams who is the Minister responsible for Military Relations. The Seamless Canada table meets twice a year. We just met in early December. It was a virtual meeting. We will meet again in the Spring, and that will be an in-person meeting.

The meeting earlier this year was in Gagetown. I think it was May 25<sup>th</sup>, and it actually coincided with my appearance here at this committee on June 22<sup>nd</sup> to provide the committee with an update in terms of the work that we've been doing. Between now and May - between the next in-person meeting - we will have regular interactions, obviously bi-lateral, simply with our Seamless Canada colleagues in Ottawa at the Department of National Defence, or we'll have discussions across Canada with our P-T colleagues.

As I referenced, if the issues are brought to us, we'll discuss internally, and certainly consult across government to see what we can do to address those issues. Is that fine?

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to hear that because that's how things - communicating with each other about what's happening, and being able to have a good relationship, a

working relationship, to know exactly how we can move forward to helping folks with these issues. I just want to know: Are there any action items that you guys end up taking from that to work on within your own province to do that work?

DARRYL EISAN: Good question, good follow-up. I referenced spousal employment earlier. That's been one of the pillars of the Seamless Canada table. Health care is a pillar of the Seamless table. Education is a pillar of the Seamless table. From that are a number of issues that spring up. For instance, when we met earlier this month, there were a few issues with respect to education that we were asked to look into. We are doing that now. It's my understanding that from the Seamless Canada folks in Ottawa who, when they're working with the provinces and territories, what they do is that they're constantly canvassing military families to see the issues that they have. Many of the issues that have been discussed here today are issues that we're hearing about at that table.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen, three minutes and eight seconds.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you so much for that, I really appreciate it. I was unaware. I mean, I know MLA Jessome has been very well-versed in this. I had the honour to sit at this table a year ago and then things changed, but I'm glad to be here today to hear from folks, and get an understanding of what's being done, how we can be moving forward. As Ms. Hopkins had said, there are folks who are in silos. How can we do things better to work with each other in order for us to move that pendulum a bit so folks can access the services that they need?

As a government, I think it's really beneficial for us to know: Where do we direct our efforts? How do we direct these things when it comes to funding, when it comes to programming, when it comes to the work that is happening on the ground that we need to target to make sure that there is going to be some movement in some way, in whatever department that comes from?

I say that with probably a minute or so left, but I don't really want to expend any time. I don't need any questions answered. I just want to say thank you very much for all the work that you do, in and out of your office, but as well, the advocacy work that you do for folks in the work that you're in right now. I know it's a difficult time for a lot of folks. Challenges are everywhere, no matter what that looks like, but we really do appreciate that you're on the ground, you're doing the work, and you're helping folks through whatever challenges that may be needed. As well, you're making people feel a little bit better in this world that we're in right now.

I just wanted to say thank you, and we can continue on with the questioning.

THE CHAIR: So you're deferring your time?

SUZY HANSEN: I'm deferring my time.

THE CHAIR: Okay. The PC caucus, you have eight minutes and 20 seconds.

MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: During these questions and answers, I've sat here, and I'll be honest, I started out a little bit cranky. I started making some notes because I want to choose my words wisely here. It's a really important point, and at the end I'll have a question to get your folks' view or opinion. Maybe you're not allowed to give opinions, but anyway. I have to choose my words wisely.

I have the utmost respect. I have many friends - mostly Navy and mostly recently retired because of the age - who are in the Canadian military. I also recognize the great economic impact that the military has on the province of Nova Scotia with our different military bases, predominantly the east coast Navy and that sort of thing. It's very important.

I believe - and I need to say this up front - that those residents who are active-duty members and family members deserve access to the great social safety net programs that we have here in Nova Scotia. These programs are stretched - like everything today - and they are typically targeted based on income. For me, it is an absolute embarrassment that we have actual active-duty military personnel - arguably some of the very most important federal government employees there are - and they are so poorly compensated that they must have social safety nets. That is unbelievable. During the discussions, when she talked about why they sold off the housing over time and all that - but I can see how it got there.

I have to wonder, what other federal government employee actually receives that little bit of compensation that they have to use social safety nets? I would expect there's not very many. Again, this is the point that I really have to make here. No wonder that they can't recruit anymore. I understand it fully. Again, I think it's shameful.

This is a Veterans Affairs Committee, and as such, we should be speaking about the veterans. That's what had me kind of cranky in the beginning, because I'm really passionate about veterans. I'm a member of the Legion. I have a lot of friends. I won't expound here too much, but I think about the veterans who were from World Wars I and II who as a kid I saw in our community and recognize now the challenges that they had with PTSD, and we never even knew it. We never recognized it. I feel bad about it. Anyway, sorry.

Last month, we had what I believe was the most impactful meeting since we started. We had volunteer groups in here from different organizations - volunteers who were trying to support veterans who struggle with PTSD and mental health challenges. Here we are today spending most of our time talking about active duty again - the most critical employees. I know I'm repeating myself, but I really want your thoughts on that.



The one point I want to make, and I guess what I'll put a question at the end. Much was said here today - and I understand the purpose - about all the reasons why active-duty members wouldn't want to come to Nova Scotia: the cost of housing, challenges with health care. My question - but I'd love to have your opinion as well - I'll ask the three at the end of the table is: Are they really any different in Vancouver or Cold Lake or Petawawa or any of those places? Are our challenges here any different than theirs are? Are these people faced with - that's not the right word - these active-duty members faced with these challenges across Canada? That's the biggest challenge here. Please give your opinion, if you don't mind.

CRAIG HOOD: The answer to your question is no. It is the same issue across the country from British Columbia to Newfoundland and Labrador, and everywhere in between and everywhere above. This is the issue that Canadian military members are facing everywhere, and these are the issues that Canadian veterans are facing everywhere.

TOM TAGGART: Nobody else wants to respond to that?

ERICA FLECK: Again, as Mr. Hood said, I don't want to have to repeat it, but on the operational stress injury, or the PTSD as some people call it, there are great supports. Personally, I've struggled. The military and VAC and peer groups - there are a lot of organizations out there. They provide amazing support if you're willing to ask for help, which is the biggest challenge for people.

SHELLEY HOPKINS: The only thing I would add is - I would agree. Every military family and veteran family is facing the same challenges across the country. I think what's unique is that we've asked them to go across the country. They're without family. They're without their own social safety nets, and that's why they're relying on the community social safety nets. They're often now living in places where they've moved from family members over the years and have settled across the country. That family unit that other people - if you choose to grow up and stay in your community and put down your roots in your community - military families don't often have those same options.

Often, we see veterans - particularly in Cape Breton, because we also service the Cape Breton area - a lot of them come home to their original communities, but that's a disruption in a lot of their personal supports. We're not built in the same way that other Canadian families are able to build those networks when they've spent their whole lives in that one community. I'd say that's a distinct difference. But yes, the experience is the same across the country for all veteran and military families.

TOM TAGGART: I don't want to leave the impression - I absolutely believe that we, the people who employ them, have to do a much better job, without question.

If I could, I'd like a quick question to Ms. Fleck. When you talked about great supports, were they while still active or after? I've been under the view that they're not quite as good after you're released. Is that correct?

ERICA FLECK: Both. I will say again that the federal government, VAC in particular, has again increased the supports to veterans, especially at the operational stress injury level and the supports that continue to be available. The major issue, and Mr. Hood would know this, is the diagnosis before you leave the military. That is always the biggest challenge.

THE CHAIR: Order. Unfortunately, that concludes the questioning period of our committee meeting today with our witnesses.

Before you leave, if anybody would like to give a brief closing statement to address our committee one more time? Show of hands, but I'll begin with Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: Thank you very much, Chair. I just want to say to all members of the committee, thank you very much for the invite. I'm very proud, obviously, as a veteran and married to one, gave birth to some, all of the above.

What I would say is, on the homelessness issue particularly - I call it the three helmets, not the three buckets, obviously from my army background. The first helmetful is those who fell through the cracks long ago. It's very complicated and ugly to try to help a homeless veteran. It's not just finding them a place to live. It is going through, trying to get them hooked up with the Legion to do their VAC paperwork, to get them in the system if they haven't filed an income tax return because they've been homeless, trying to work with them and get them caseworkers assisting with, again, income tax returns, working with the Department of Community Services. Can they go on Income Assistance? All of these steps. It's not just "bring them in, they want to be helped." Sometimes it takes eight to nine months to sort through just for one person.

Some people get all the way there and they don't want to be housed. I'll be honest. I've had a lot of success with the people at this table - in particular Ms. Knight. She and her team have been amazing: Hey, I have a person and I need them housed now. It has always happened. Somewhere there's magical powder in the background that makes it work.

That second helmet is what we're dealing with now. It's the current crisis. It's the current no housing, no leases, not available, rent caps - all of those things, and just the general cost of living, coupled with everything else.

Then the third helmet is: what does next year look like? That is what terrifies me, that we don't know. We don't know how we can help. I'm out on the street in my spare time, working with the ones I do know, and again, it's just because I have a relationship

with them. We'll continue to push them to the Legion. I use MFRC services all the time, and I call Ms. Knight a lot to say that I need help.

[3:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We do have some committee business to attend to, so I would ask any of our closing statements to be fairly brief, if we could. Mr. Hood.

CRAIG HOOD: Right now, the Royal Canadian Legion is dealing with roughly 400 VAC cases. That's what we're dealing with in assisting veterans to get all the care that they deserve through Veterans Affairs. On top of that, we have our Veteran Outreach Programs that help and assist in bringing that dignity back to the veterans through a variety of activities, as simple as getting together for coffee to more extensive programs.

Moving forward, as the new executive director here, I will be looking at forging new relationships with the various departments to develop ways that I hope are more efficient, so that we can use our resources more efficiently and effectively to get effective care to those veterans and their families, and not rinse and repeat a lot of the resources. That will be my goal. I know in meeting with some of my colleagues here today, that they share the same objectives.

THE CHAIR: Anyone else for closing statements? Thank you so much. As an MLA who represents the proud community of CFB Greenwood, I do work with the MFRCs and everything as well there. We understand the great work that everyone is doing. Thanks for this conversation today. We're going to take a three-minute recess to allow our guests to leave, and then we'll come back to our committee business.

[3:47 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[3:50 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. I will ask our committee members to come back to their chairs. As our guests leave the room, we will continue with our committee business. The first item of business is a discussion around a letter to the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada about the administrative and funding challenges faced by peer support organizations. This is a letter that was distributed by the clerk to our members with a final change made. Is there any discussion on the letter that we will be sending?

Seeing no discussion, that's done. Thank you very much.

The next item of business was an issue brought by MLA Ince at the last meeting - discussing a process of writing to other Provinces regarding the creation of Veterans Affairs committees in their provinces, and that was considered at the last meeting. There were three options put forward by the clerk for the committee to discuss. The first one,

contact the clerks of committees in other provinces to ask how they address issues or legislation on veterans. The second was providing the clerks of committees in other provinces with information about our Nova Scotia Veterans Affairs Committee, along with our annual report to them. The third option would be to reach out to the Speakers of other provinces about starting their own Veterans Affairs Committee.

With those options about the committee reaching out and sending something out, is there any discussion on that?

HON. BEN JESSOME: I'm in favour of Options 1 and 2.

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion on that? It would be a general agreement around the table. The clerk will be instructed to pursue Options 1 and 2, and then that will be that. All right, very good.

Is there any other business?

BEN JESSOME: In response to some of the positive feedback we got from a couple of government representatives about the takeaway around an optional identifier for government applications for folks to identify as a serving member of the CAF or a veteran, I make a motion that our committee direct the Chair to write to Executive Council members, recommending the use of an option on departmental applications for applicants to identify as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces or a veteran.

THE CHAIR: Just a quick question. Are you asking the committee to possibly consider a letter from the Chair directing them or asking - notifying them of what we heard in the meeting today?

BEN JESSOME: I think that my motion is to make a recommendation. We can't force ministers to do anything, but I think that in keeping with the spirit of adding to the information that's available with respect to serving men and women, Ms. Hopkins relayed the value that they place in trying to establish more research and support that work. I suggest that it would be a natural recommendation from the committee to make a recommendation to ministers that would support the research that is out there for our serving men and women. I'm comfortable making a recommendation. Whether ministers are comfortable with it or not, that's up to them. I think as a Veterans Affairs Committee, I think that it's our job to advocate for veterans.

THE CHAIR: Is there any other discussion on MLA Jessome's motion? MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I have to apologize because I may have been right, and I only caught part of that discussion. First off, are we talking about veterans here, or are we talking about veterans and active service members? The other thing is that I'm not ready to

vote for that yet. I've got to give that some thought. Everything we do has implications or unintended consequences and, I think I've said this before, I'm not prepared to vote. I will vote against any motion that I don't fully understand.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I also want to make a note to the fact that the deputy minister mentioned that might be something the Public Service Commission already has, but they haven't quite enacted it in the way that I think MLA Jessome is speaking to. It's just to confirm and reiterate the fact that we want to make sure that we have - and it was spoken today about priorities of our military members, so that we can treat them with dignity in a way that we know that they are a priority. I agree with MLA Jessome's motion put forward. I will be supporting it. But I will say that it's essentially identifiers so that we actually have the information and the data to do the work that we do.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I'll just quickly clarify that the motion would be for serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces as well as veterans. It would include both of those, just for clarification. I would also add that I recognize that we're not in a decision-making role on behalf of ministers. This is a simple offer to express, through the discussion that we've had today, what I believe to be a reasonable step in helping support the cause of increasing the information that we have about our serving men and women.

THE CHAIR: Is there any other discussion? MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: I believe what I heard is that the staff will bring back - and they were going to look at it and so on. I would be surprised if they did not have communication with the clerk just to close that loop on what's happening, and a motion is not appropriate at this time, in my mind. To tie up other resources in ministerial Cabinet and all of that when it's being actioned in my mind - that's what I think I heard - is unnecessary. I would not support that at this time, and I look forward to getting the information back through the clerk that something is being done.

THE CHAIR: I saw MLA Hansen's hand first.

SUZY HANSEN: I do want to say that we've heard here today that sometimes things get missed when we talk about departments - sometimes not having those conversations with each other. I think it's just a reminder maybe just to recognize the fact that these are the things that we should be looking at. This is why we meet in committees, to gather information to be able to help the work that we do in government. I just wanted to point that out.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome, you had your hand up.

BEN JESSOME: I just note that while I expect there will be some follow-up with the department representatives who were here today, the intention behind the motion would be to make the recommendation to the entirety of the Executive Council. Frankly, they could respond to it, they could do nothing with it. If they so choose, there's really not a lot that's incumbent on ministers to do anything. It's a simple show from this committee that we believe that this is reasonable step forward, that there are other optional identifiers that pop up on most if not all government applications. It just seems like a reasonable idea in the spirit of adding to the research that's out there for military members and veterans.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart, did you have your hand up?

TOM TAGGART: I did. The deputy ministers were here, they saw it, they heard what we had to say. We'll see what comes from that.

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes our meeting for this afternoon. The next meeting will be January 16, 2024. Our topic will be True Patriot Love: Veterans Virtual Hub/Veteran Volunteerism. Our witnesses will be the organization True Patriot Love.

The meeting is adjourned. Merry Christmas, one and all. Thank you.

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