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**Standing Committee on
Social Policy**

Soldiers' Aid Commission Act,
2020

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Wednesday 21 October 2020

**Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Loi de 2020 sur la Commission
d'aide aux anciens combattants

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Mercredi 21 octobre 2020

Chair: Natalia Kusendova
Clerk: Tanzima Khan

Présidente : Natalia Kusendova
Greffière : Tanzima Khan

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL POLICY**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DE
LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE**

Wednesday 21 October 2020

Mercredi 21 octobre 2020

The committee met at 0900 in committee room 2 and by video conference.

**SOLDIERS' AID COMMISSION ACT, 2020
LOI DE 2020 SUR LA COMMISSION
D'AIDE AUX ANCIENS COMBATTANTS**

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 202, An Act to continue the Soldiers' Aid Commission / Projet de loi 202, Loi prorogeant la Commission d'aide aux anciens combattants.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order. We are here for public hearings on Bill 202, An Act to continue the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

As a reminder, the deadline for written submissions is 7 p.m. on Thursday, October 22, 2020. The deadline for filing amendments to the bill is 5 p.m. on Friday, October 23, 2020.

We have already done the attendance check this morning. I see that we are also joined by MPP Martin. Could you please—

Mrs. Robin Martin: Yes—sorry; my apologies, Chair. MPP Martin, here in Toronto.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much, MPP Martin.

We are also joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard, and broadcast and recording.

To make sure that everyone can understand what is going on, it is important that all participants speak slowly and clearly. Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak.

**MINISTRY OF CHILDREN, COMMUNITY
AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Are there any questions before we begin? Seeing none, I will now call on the Honourable Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services.

You will have 15 minutes for your presentation, followed by 45 minutes of questions from the members of the committee. The questions will be divided into three rounds of six minutes for the government members, three rounds of six minutes for the official opposition and two rounds of 4.5 minutes for the independent members as a group. I will give reminders of the time remaining during the presentations and the questions.

Minister, thank you for joining us. The floor is yours.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much, Chair, and good morning to everyone. On this gloomy Wednesday, we've got some good things to talk about here this morning regarding the Soldiers' Aid Commission Act. It's great to see everybody on the line.

I don't get to appear before committee very often. As a matter of fact, this is the first time I've appeared at a committee since the election in 2018; of course, in opposition I used to appear at committees all the time. I just want to thank all of those people behind the scenes who work so hard in making sure that our committees are still available throughout this pandemic. The team at the Legislature does such a fantastic job at making sure that democracy continues to roll along at Queen's Park, so I'd like to thank the Clerk and all of the staff who have supported the committees' role over the past several months.

It is rare that I do have the pleasure to directly address a committee, especially regarding a matter that's of such great importance to me personally, the Soldiers' Aid Commission Act, 2020. It hits close to home for me. As the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services and the proud member for Bay of Quinte in eastern Ontario, home to Canada's largest air force base, CFB Trenton, this really does hit close to home. I've met with many, many servicepeople, military men and women, along with their families, and I do know how difficult it can be for them when they leave the armed forces and re-enter civilian life. This bill is a practical way for all of us in Ontario to say to our vets, "Thank you for your service to our country."

The Soldiers' Aid Commission, as an institution, is over a century old. It's 105 years old. In fact, when you look at that, it predates Remembrance Day, or Armistice Day, as it was originally known. Created way back in 1915, the Soldiers' Aid Commission was designed to help support Ontario veterans and their families returning home from the First World War.

I was recently, this summer, on a flight with my wife, and I had the opportunity to watch the movie 1917. I don't know how many of you have been able to watch that Hollywood film lately, but it's the story of two young soldiers who are making their way through to the troops on the front line during the First World War, set in 1917, and talks about their trials and tribulations. And you're actually walking along with them in the movie as they're making their way through the battlefields and running into

explosives, mud-filled trenches with rats, fires and enemy forces. As I was watching the movie, I was thinking, “Wow, this is why the Soldiers’ Aid Commission was invented back in 1915.” It was to help these young men, these people who were returning home from those battlefields over in Europe.

As I mentioned, it was created in 1915, the Soldiers’ Aid Commission, and then later expanded to support those who had served in World War II and the Korean War. Since this time, the commission’s mandate has remained largely unchanged for almost 40 years. Of more than 230,000 veterans currently living in Ontario today, 93% of them don’t have access to the important support that the Soldiers’ Aid Commission provides. It’s time that changes.

I want to thank the Soldiers’ Aid Commission chair, Colin Rowe—he’s an outstanding gentleman—and the vice-chair, John Stapleton, also an outstanding gentleman. They will be speaking to the committee during its study of this bill. I want to thank them for their long-standing advocacy for this expansion to the Soldiers’ Aid Commission. Colin and John have served on the commission for 17 and 18 years, respectively. They raised the issue with me as soon as I took the portfolio back in June of 2019. I know they have raised it as well with previous ministers and previous governments over the many years that they have served. Following the discussions that I had with them, my ministry immediately started the process that was necessary to move forward with this expansion to ensure that all veterans can receive this support no matter where or when they served.

Today, the Soldiers’ Aid Commission is the only provincial agency in Canada that delivers financial support directly to veterans. It works alongside Veterans Affairs Canada, which has the primary responsibility for veterans in Canada, as we all know, and the Royal Canadian Legion, one of the most important organizations out there that supports our veterans. There are over 400 Legion branches in Ontario and 100,000 members across the province, so they’re doing a fantastic job. They provide direct local supports to veterans through programming such as homeless veterans assistance and youth programs.

There are non-profit community organizations as well that dedicate their time to providing supports to veterans and their families across Canada and across Ontario, organizations like VETS Canada, Wounded Warriors and Together We Stand, who work with at-risk veterans and help them reintegrate into civilian life. Again, you will be able to hear from some of these organizations during the day today as the committee does its work.

The commission’s eight incredible volunteer commissioners—I’ve met them all and they’re all outstanding people. They’ve worked so hard on the Soldiers’ Aid Commission. They work diligently to fulfill their mandate, which, I mentioned earlier, has had little change since the year I was born, actually, in 1970. It hasn’t changed much in 50 years.

They continue to support veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War with critical one-time expenses,

such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, home modifications, counselling and many other needs. It’s a sad reality, unfortunately, that with each passing year, the number of living veterans who served in the two world wars and the Korean War decreases. Of course, there is no one left from the First World War; they’ve long been laid to rest. According to stats from Veterans Affairs Canada, the average age of a Second World War veteran is 94 years old and the average age of a Korean war vet is 87.

Today, younger veterans who served elsewhere are ineligible for support from the Soldiers’ Aid Commission. As I stated earlier, about 93% of veterans in Ontario aren’t eligible for any support from the commission because of the way that the law has stood now for decades. This would include the long list of Canadian men and women in Ontario who served their country throughout the later decades of the 20th century and then early in this century.

0910

We cannot forget our brave military members who have served in UN peacekeeping missions as well, in the Balkans and Somalia and elsewhere, including the many who have fought in Afghanistan. For more than 12 years, longer than both world wars combined, Canadian forces have operated in Afghanistan. More than 40,000 women and men of the Canadian Armed Forces were deployed, the largest deployment since the Second World War. Many were deployed more than once, and many of them come from our province, Ontario. We honour our brave men and women who gave their lives protecting others, and for those who served and returned home, their lives will never be the same.

As I said, I represent the riding of Bay of Quinte, and prior to getting into politics—many of you probably know this—I served as the news director at Quinte Broadcasting, which operated three radio stations here in the Quinte region as the Afghan war was taking place. I covered way too many repatriation ceremonies at CFB Trenton as the flag-draped caskets of our heroes, our men and women who lost their lives in Afghanistan, were returned home to the tarmac at 8 Wing. I stood along that tarmac with widows, brothers and sisters, who lost their brother and sister in Afghanistan and other family members and friends. It still makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck, thinking about being on the tarmac with those individuals who lost their loved ones in the Afghanistan conflict.

Of course, the caskets would be loaded into hearses and then make their way from CFB Trenton down what we know as the Highway of Heroes along the 401 to the chief coroner’s office in Toronto. It was amazing, I’ll tell you, to be a part of that and to actually see the Highway of Heroes grow. It started with a few firefighters and first responders standing along the overpasses in the Trenton area, and then expanded into the Cobourg area and Port Hope and Oshawa. Before you knew it, the whole way along that Highway of Heroes, men and women who had no connection to these individuals who had lost their lives in Afghanistan were standing on top of these overpasses, waving their Canadian flags. It is something that we all should be proud of as Ontarians and as Canadians.

As we've seen in the aftermath of wars before our time, injuries experienced in service can show themselves at later times in life. Whether they're physical or mental injuries, these can lead to unexpected financial needs for veterans that deserve special attention. That's why the Soldiers' Aid Commission should be there for them. Ontarians in every generation have stepped up to serve their country with the same duty, passion and commitment of those veterans who have gone before. And after they have completed active service, whether they're 25 or they're 55 years old, we know that many of them can face challenges.

For example, many veterans have difficulty adjusting to civilian life after leaving the armed forces, and this is reflected in the statistics that we have. In 2019, of the regular force veterans who left the Canadian Armed Forces between 1998 and 2018, 39% of them, nearly two out of five, reported their transition to post-service life as being difficult or very difficult. Meanwhile, one third of veterans with families reported that their release was also difficult for their spouse, their partner or their children.

Veterans are also facing financial challenges in many situations. In their first three years transitioning to civilian life, veterans have a lower income compared with their final year in the Canadian Armed Forces. That's why a modernized Soldiers' Aid Commission will provide access to employment readiness supports, which is a key part of this. Canadian forces members are well-known for their leadership, teamwork and dedication, and we want to ensure that they have the support to put these skills to use in the workforce and excel in their new careers.

Veterans face various physical and mental health challenges, too: 35% of veterans have health-related activity limitations at work, compared to 13% of Canadians. They're overrepresented among people with disabilities and have a higher risk of suicide, as we all know, than the average Canadian.

While I know there are many stats to take in, it's evidence like this that makes it clear that Ontario needs to do more to support our veterans. We must act, not in charity but in the firm conviction and belief that veterans are entitled to and deserve post-service support.

Our veterans never asked for this guarantee of support in writing before they signed up. They didn't ask to see the terms of their post-service life in detail. They trusted that the Ontario and Canadian governments would protect them as they protected us, and we cannot break that covenant with them. Supporting our vets and their families is not only the right thing to do, it's the best thing we can do to help them reintegrate into our communities, our neighbourhoods and our society here in Ontario.

We faced a choice, actually, of continuing to leave this commission stagnant, as previous governments had, serving fewer and fewer veterans each year, or modernizing it to support a whole new generation of veterans and their families. The choice that we've made to modernize the commission is both practical and it's symbolic too—practical in that we know that the need for support is there, but highly symbolic in that it's a sign that our government is going to stand with those who served and protected us.

These legislative proposals carry both our government's practical and symbolic desire to support a new generation of vets and their families, and I'd like to take a moment to underline the importance of preserving our commitment to veterans in new legislation. With the new legislation, we can clearly demonstrate to our veterans that we've got their backs for the long haul and show them that we're planning for the future. It will show Ontario's strong and concrete commitment to veterans—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): One minute remaining.

Hon. Todd Smith: How long? One minute?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Yes.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you. It will show Ontario's strong and concrete commitment to veterans and their families and symbolize the importance of supporting our vets, who have made tremendous sacrifices for the country and our province.

We know the impact the Soldiers' Aid Commission has made on Ontario veterans over the last century. For decades, the commission has been there for eligible vets and their families, and has funded countless requests, including new hearing aids, glasses, dentures and modifications to stay in their homes.

As a result of this support, the Soldiers' Aid Commission receives countless thank-you notes, cards and letters from applicants each year. This support means the world to the families who have received assistance from the commission. Over the years, they've collected hundreds of these notes, and they proudly display them in their boardroom to remind them of the veterans and their families who they have been able to assist. With this change in legislation, we'll be able to provide that assistance to our modern-day veterans for the next 105 years.

Thanks to the committee for hearing me this morning.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much, Minister. We will now begin our rounds of questions with the official opposition for six minutes. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great. Am I unmuted?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great, thank you. And thank you, Minister, for going over in great detail all of the bill and coming out to this level of committee.

Last year around this time, local veterans within my community and different organizations actually contacted my office and were wondering about the gaps in the care for veterans. I brought it forward; I stood in the House and, Minister, you answered my questions. I'm pleased to see that it's at this stage right now.

My question would be, to the minister, around defining "veteran" and what this legislation will consider a veteran. I know that in the past, veterans were—Veterans Affairs Canada defines a veteran as "any former member of the Canadian Armed Forces who successfully underwent basic training and is honourably discharged." That is different than the Canadian Legion's method of defining a veteran. They define it as honours service of any person who is honourably serving.

I'm wondering—because my son, as I often speak about, is 37 years old. In the current standards, will he be classified as a veteran?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, you're absolutely right, and thanks to your son for his service to our country. I know you're very, very proud of his commitment and the fact that he is serving.

0920

Our goal, as I mentioned, is to expand access and to ensure that all Ontario veterans—that's all Ontario veterans—will be able to benefit from the support provided by the commission. That includes all of those veterans who were eligible under the previous legislation, as it stood. That included, of course, those who, as I mentioned, served in the First World War, the Second World War or the Korean War. They may have also served in the merchant navy or with allied forces other than the Canadian Armed Forces during World War II or the Korean War.

The one thing that I really didn't mention—you're quite right as well, MPP Stevens, in talking about the fact that anyone who has completed the basic training and has been honourably discharged qualifies. Those are two major keys.

The other thing that I didn't hit on quite as much as I hoped to in my remarks, and maybe this is a good opportunity to do that, is it also includes family members of the service member. One of the great challenges that military families have—and I don't know your son's personal situation, but if he has a common-law spouse or a spouse, they will be able to access the services of the Soldiers' Aid Commission as well and any dependent children will also have the opportunity to access funding. I just want to highlight the fact that it's not only the military member who will be able to access the Soldiers' Aid Commission funds; it will also be family members, so spouses, common-law spouses and any dependent children.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great. Just quickly then on that note, would it be including after the veteran is deceased for the family members?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes. That's what we've seen over the last many years that the Soldier's Aid Commission has been operating, that it does support the widows of veterans.

One of the stories, I know, that the commissioners will reference—of course, as I mentioned, they have hundreds and hundreds of stories where they've helped family members over the years. The service member is long gone but that widow is there. One of the stories that they were telling me was that there was a widow who, because of her lack of mobility, was only able to access the upper floors of her home. She wasn't able to get down the stairs, and so she was living on the upper floor of her house.

What the Soldiers' Aid Commission was able to do, along with some other benevolent funds that are out there—keep in mind that the Soldiers' Aid Commission can work with other benevolent funds, like the Ontario Command and others—was to provide a stairlift to allow her to get up and down the stairs so she could access her whole house and get outside and enjoy the outside too.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Minister, sorry, but thank you for answering that question. I've got a few and I only get six minutes, so I've got to get them in. I'm glad to hear it will go to the significant others of the deceased veterans.

While increasing the fund to \$1.5 million is substantive, it now covers a disproportionately higher amount of veterans. Basically, that seems not enough money for the amount of new veterans who might be coming forward. Can you explain how you arrived at the number and why you feel it will be enough to cover the new demand of new veterans?

Hon. Todd Smith: It's a fair question. We do know, and we hope, that modern-day veterans, which are obviously a larger pool than the current veterans we have, will access the Soldiers' Aid Commission funding if they need it.

What we've done is we've taken the number of applications that were received—because keep in mind, not everyone who is a veteran will be accessing this funding. So we've taken that same rate of application that existed under the previous pool, overlaid it on top of the new pool of eligible veterans who are out there and then added 25%—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you, Minister. Thank you very much. We will now proceed to the government members for six minutes, with MPP McDonell.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Thank you, Minister, for coming out. It's quite amazing when you hear some of the stories of some of our soldiers during the two wars and Afghanistan. I often think of a couple of years ago, the Glengarry News had letters from the front from a Mr. Ferguson, who lived just down the road. He was killed part way through the First World War. He talked about living in the trenches, being in the trenches on the front line for two years without leave, which is quite hard to imagine, in those conditions. He never complained. There were quite a few letters, but it was funny how positive these letters could be. He talked about the rats in the trenches. He said how they're kind of a benefit because they kept the trenches clean, which is a different take on something that I would not want to be living beside. It was really an amazing story.

Even in later days in Afghanistan, our local high school, which is not very large—it's a school that at the time and over the years had 300 to 400 students. There were somewhere around 10 students, graduates of Char-Lan, who actually were stationed over in Afghanistan. I know some of the students personally, including some of their parents. Of course, there were a number of issues coming back from the front, just as we've seen with most veterans. It's very difficult to come back. War really impacts people certainly for the rest of their lives.

I'm glad to hear that the ministry has undertaken a process to ensure that there will be resources in place to back up this expanded aid. I would anticipate your ministry would have taken into account how, as a program of last resort, the Soldiers' Aid Commission needs to be able to build on the support that has been provided by other

programs and agencies, like those we are hearing about later today.

I'm just wondering if you can speak on how this expanded mandate builds on the incredible work being done across the province in support of veterans and other investments that the government is making.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks, MPP McDonell, for that story. It's a remarkable story—the rats in the trenches—that's for sure. We cannot underestimate or even imagine what many of these veterans have had to deal with, not just in the First and Second World Wars and Korean War, but also in the modern conflicts that they've been involved in.

We have many, many benevolent funds, and of course Veterans Affairs Canada is out there. They have the primary responsibility for our Canadian veterans, to provide the funding that they need. The Soldiers' Aid Commission has been that backstop. It has been that door of last resort to help individuals who may need a little extra help because they weren't able to access enough funding from some of those benevolent funds, like the Veterans Emergency Fund or Assistance Fund or the Legion poppy fund. There are caps that are in place with some of these funds, similar to the fact that there are caps in place with the Soldiers' Aid Commission. You're able to access \$2,000 a year per household from the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, the commissioners do a good job of working with those other arms that are out there, those other benevolent funds that are out there, to get individuals the support that they may need. I can share with the committee that the average amount of funding distributed per application over the past six years hasn't even been that \$2,000; it's been \$1,250. That's been the average application that has been received by the Soldiers' Aid Commission. That may also answer part of MPP Stevens's question earlier. Individuals weren't accessing all of the \$2,000; they were accessing a piece of it, and then working with some of those other funds and organizations that are out there that are assisting our veterans, too.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I believe MPP Babikian has a question.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Good morning.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): One minute remaining.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Minister, as you mentioned, the members of the commission have advocated for an expansion, but it took until this year for that change to move forward. Can you explain why the changes are only moving forward now?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes. As I mentioned, I met with the members of the commission shortly after taking over this ministry in June 2019. As I mentioned, the first thing they said to me was they wanted to expand the mandate. As you can imagine, it takes some time to do that. My team has been working at this for quite some time, and that's why I'm glad that we're at the point that we are now that we can finally see this mandate expanded after 50 years.

0930

The commissioners are ecstatic about this. Actually, the minister federally, Lawrence MacAulay, is quite grateful

for the fact that the Soldiers' Aid Commission will be continuing because every little bit that helps our veterans is welcome. This may seem like a small amount of money in the grand scheme of things, but every little bit counts in supporting our veterans, and I know—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you, Minister. We will now proceed to 4.5 minutes by our independent member, MPP Karahalios.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: I do not have any questions at this time.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): We will now bring it back to the official opposition for six minutes. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will be asking the minister again, through you.

In my riding, it has been discovered that an astonishing number of homeless individuals in the city are actually veterans. It was reported by an outreach worker, one of my local Legion treasurers, Paul Molnar, from Branch 350 in St. Catharines. This type of program will help them be able to get on their feet, of course, as you mentioned, yet there are many more that are currently on the Ontario Disability Support Program. Can you confirm this money will not be clawed back from the individuals on ODSP if they require emergency support? There is a sentiment among the people in my community that anything virtuous that comes along has to be paid back later. Can you expand on the ODSP clawback and how it will work with this program?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, I'm happy to answer that question and happy to inform you and those who may have a concern about this that there will be no clawback on the Soldiers' Aid Commission funds that are received for anybody that's on ODSP. We've made that quite clear.

Unfortunately, as you mentioned, many of our veterans are on social assistance, so we do not want to penalize them in any way. As a matter of fact, what we're trying to do is encourage those who can work to participate in some of the retraining programs that will be offered as one of the new benefits of the modernized Soldiers' Aid Commission Act so that they can access training, where appropriate and where applicable. They can use it for tuition; they can use it for any kind of micro-credentialing or retraining that may be available to them to help them back up on their feet, as you mentioned. But no, there will be no clawback when it comes to ODSP.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay. Great. Thank you very much.

Also, I've had a tour of the Ontario Command, as I saw you have as well. I thank Pam Sweeny and Garry Pond, who will be, I believe, in front of this committee later on, for their advocacy and their heart, for being on the front lines and for all the hard work that is done from their organization.

Ontario Command has a robust program to outreach and support veterans with the Homeless Veterans Assistance Program. Homelessness and poverty—it's an important goal to have for any legislation, especially yours. It is important to state it in the legislation. Make it clear.

Even though I suspect it would be decided in regulation, will this legislation have any stated goals around poverty and homelessness for veterans, somewhat of a guiding light for future investments in this sector?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you, and I'm looking forward to the Ontario Command being represented here at the committee today, too. They are doing great work, and as a matter of fact, that is where we made the announcement of the Soldiers' Aid Commission Act. It was actually in front of the Aurora Royal Canadian Legion, but in that same parking lot, as you may know, the Ontario Command has their offices as well. It was great to talk to those folks. As you'll know, the Ontario Command of the Legion is the largest service-oriented organization in Ontario, so it's quite a remarkable thing, and they are doing fantastic work there.

What I can tell you is that what we are doing with the commission is providing that funding, up to \$2,000 per household per year. Social assistance, my ministry in general, is looking at a more thorough Poverty Reduction Strategy. We've been having many, many consultations over the last number of months, and we'll be conveying the findings. Of course, we're required by law to have that Poverty Reduction Strategy done in Ontario every five years.

To answer your question, there may be specifics in that review about veterans, but we will continue to work with organizations like the Ontario Command and many of the benevolent funds that are out there. I know Together We Stand and some of the other organizations will be represented at the committee today as well.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great. Just highlighting on that, I've talked to many Legions, especially my local Legions, and the poppy fund is almost this year—because the pandemic has hit the Legions especially hard. You had mentioned that some Legions could actually use their poppy funds as a different—a little war chest, I guess. But unfortunately, because the poppy program campaign is almost going to be non-existent, would you look at maybe moving some of those monies towards the local Legions and supporting them in the future?

Hon. Todd Smith: I can tell you that our government is a strong supporter of our local Legions and other veterans organizations that are out there across the province. That's why we supported our Legions and eased the burden on our Legion halls by ensuring that they no longer have to pay property taxes, so that was one step that we took. Minister MacLeod, our Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, also announced earlier this year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of our response—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you, Minister. I'm so sorry to interrupt, but we have to move on to the government members now, with MPP Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Hello, Minister. I would like to thank you for making this change a priority and ensuring we act on the recommendations of the commission. I know that many veterans in my riding of Scarborough—Agincourt, and in Scarborough in general, will be quite happy with the changes and your advocacy.

You and I both know, however, that support of our veterans is about more than words on paper. There also has to be an investment in the program to ensure it can serve those who will be newly eligible for this support. That's why I was glad to see the government announce there's increased funding alongside this legislation to support this expanded mandate.

Can you speak to how you identified the amount for this new investment and if you are confident this will meet the needs of our veterans?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you, MPP Babikian, for that question. If I could just wrap up the final moments of my conversation there with MPP Stevens, Minister MacLeod has also announced an \$83-million fund earlier this year, through the Ontario Trillium Foundation, which we all know extremely well, to recover from the impacts of COVID-19. So that's available to our Royal Canadian Legions.

For those members who are on this call here and haven't reached out to their local Legion yet to inform them of this \$83 million, it would be advisable that you do that. I know you've probably all been in contact with your Legions because, of course, Remembrance Day is not too far away. Although Remembrance Day is going to look very, very different this year in many communities, they still need our support. That \$83 million is available. So I just wanted to get that out for MPP Stevens and the rest of the members of the committee as well.

0940

To your question, Aris, we actually are anticipating an increase in the number of applications as a result of expanding the mandate. That's obvious. That's why we're moving forward with these legislative changes. We want more veterans to be able to access the important support that's provided by the Soldiers' Aid Commission. To support this expansion, we're increasing the amount of funding available for the commission to just over \$1.5 million. That's an increase of about \$1.3 million, actually, so it just goes to show you how small the funding was in the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

This is a very, very sizable increase, given what we expect to be a sizable increase in the number of applications that the commission will be receiving as well. Based on a review of the current uptake of support through the Soldiers' Aid Commission as well as projections of uptake of the expanded set of services under the new mandate, we're confident that the new funding will allow the commission to respond to the needs of our veterans who apply to the commission for support. Of course, we're going to continue to monitor any trends that we see in applications, and we'll take that feedback from the commissioners as well and from veterans and other agencies that support our servicemen and women and ensure that we are responding to their needs.

The other thing that we will be doing is ensuring that there's more accountability with the Soldiers' Aid Commission, so each year there will be a report that's tabled in the Legislature for all parties to view and see exactly how the money has been spent and what the budget of the Soldiers' Aid Commission has been.

Thank you for that important question, MPP Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you. Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Two minutes.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Okay. Minister, can you speak to how this expanded mandate builds on the incredible work being done across the province to support our veterans and other investments the government is making?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thank you for that. As I mentioned earlier, there are lots of different organizations that are working hand in glove here to ensure that we're providing support to our veterans. That, of course, starts with Veterans Affairs Canada, which is the federal government, which is providing the primary responsibility in supports to our vets, and then organizations like the Royal Canadian Legion, the Ontario Command, other organizations out there that are responsible for assisting veterans and their families. As I mentioned, there are over 400 Legions across the province with 100,000 members, and the Ontario Command is doing exceptional work.

There are other organizations out there that you'll be hearing from later this morning or this afternoon, like Together We Stand, many others out there—as well, Wounded Warriors and True Patriot Love, which is a great gala that we would normally be having about this time of year that raises funds and supports our veterans not just in Ontario but across the country. Together We Stand is actually supporting the military families, and I know they're looking forward to presenting to the committee here this afternoon, so hopefully you'll have some good questions to ask them when they do make their appearance.

But we're working with all of these organizations together. And the commissioners will say this: If they can't provide the funding necessary, the funding they have, they will work with these other benevolent organizations to try and meet the need, working in harmony with those other organizations.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you. We will now move on to our independent member, MPP Karahalios.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Good morning, Minister Smith. Thanks for coming into the committee today.

I'm really happy to hear the transparency piece that you will be providing to the Legislature. How that money is spent—I think that's really important. I have one question. You said it's \$1.5 million, and it is a big increase. I remember that it was \$300,000 before this. Is that correct? Yes.

Hon. Todd Smith: Not even, yes.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Is there going to be a cap on that? You're anticipating an increase; I did hear that. So is there a possibility that there will be vets who will be turned away? Will there be a waiting list because of this? Could you comment on that?

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, we certainly would not. What we have right now has increased it from just over \$250,000—that's actually where the funding was at previously—to over \$1.5 million. It's about \$1.55 million that will be available. We've done a lot of work, actually,

in modelling where we think this will go. We're not entirely sure, though, until you actually activate it.

It's going to be up to the commissioners. They're the ones who will meet. They will scour all of the applications that they receive. They're the ones who will ultimately decide where the money gets spent. They're working within that \$1.55-million allocation to start with. We believe, given the extra padding that we've added there, we've gone a little bit above, by about 25%, on where we currently are.

But again, we're talking about modern-day veterans with different situations that they're dealing with. The training piece is entirely new, and the mental health piece is entirely new as well. That's not something that was previously part of the Soldiers' Aid Commission. We do know that many of our veterans—and I know many of them personally—are dealing with PTSD and anxiety and other mental health issues, so they may be using some of the funding for those types of programs. We've done the best that we can to try and model where we think this will go and the number of applications we'll receive, and that's where the \$1.55 million is going.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Is there going to be a per-veteran cap? Are they going to be making separate applications for things, like something for hearing aids, something for mental health, and is there a cap per category or per person?

Hon. Todd Smith: It's per person. It's \$2,000—per household, actually. It may sound like it's not a lot of money, but I know that, given Veterans Affairs Canada and what they're offering to our vets, what the Ontario Command and the poppy fund are able to assist with, and with other organizations like True Patriot Love and Together We Stand and other organizations—working together, hopefully we can help meet some of that need. But the cap is \$2,000 per household.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: And if I have time—will you be pushing the federal government to put more money towards supporting our veterans?

Hon. Todd Smith: We've had great conversations with Minister MacAulay. There was some talk of maybe the feds and the province working together on the Soldiers' Aid Commission. At the end of the day, we decided to keep the two separate and have the Soldiers' Aid Commission be an Ontario organization with its own governance structure. We are changing some of the governance, as well, of the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

Any time we have the opportunity, we always encourage the federal government to do more for our veterans through Veterans Affairs Canada. I will tell you that Minister MacAulay was quite pleased that we are continuing to operate the Soldiers' Aid Commission, because every little bit helps, and I know he appreciates that Ontario is unique in the fact that we're the only province or territory in Canada that has a program like this. He's obviously happy to see it extended to modern-day veterans too.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Thank you so much.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Now we will go back to the government for the last round of questions. MPP Bailey, please.

Hon. Todd Smith: You're on mute, Bobby.

You're still on mute, Bobby; we can't hear you.

Mr. Robert Bailey: There. How's that?

Hon. Todd Smith: I believe you were talking about how handsome I look today.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Well, I was, yes—your smiling demeanour there and your wonderful dulcet tones. Broadcasting certainly misses you, I know. Anyway, thank you very much for the presentation today.

One question I wanted to get on the record, because I might not get a chance the rest of the day, is about the reserve units. I know a number of young men and women in my riding of Sarnia–Lambton belong to the 1st Hussars, plus other units, and a number of young people that you would know here at Queen's Park that are executive assistants—maybe even members—are members of reserve units. Can you just explain, for my edification, that yes, indeed, they are covered and to the same degree as actual veterans that served?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for that question. The definition of who qualifies is anybody who has completed their basic training and has been honourably discharged. So if you've completed basic training and you're in the reserves, then you and your family members will qualify for the Soldiers' Aid Commission funding. I know we have many in the reserves—I have one of the most famous ones in Canadian war history here in my riding, the Hasty Ps, the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, who have many, many honours. So anyone, Bob, who's in the reserves and who has completed their basic training—which obviously they have.

Mr. Robert Bailey: I just want to give a shout-out to both Minister MacLeod for the work that she's done and of course the work that you've done. I had the opportunity a number of times in the last two years to meet with the different provincial reps, trying to improve services for veterans. I know this will be great.

0950

Whenever we get together, whether it's on Zoom again—there are a number of organizations here in Ontario. There's Helmets to Hardhats, led by Joe Maloney. He retired from the boilermakers union, and he's heading that up, the Helmets to Hardhats. I know Minister McNaughton is working with them to try and place those men and women who have come back and get them into a good-paying job.

Of course, I work with all of our Royal Canadian Legions. I have at least six in my riding that I try and make an opportunity to get around to. I know they do great work. I'm going to follow up with them on that \$83 million. I'm sure they can use part of that, anyway.

I also had the opportunity—MPP McDonnell talked about the trenches and the letters back home. I was very fortunate in 2011; I had the opportunity to go to France, to Normandy, and I was at the Vimy memorial. I was down in those trenches and had just some small idea of what it

must have been like down in those trenches. Then also, of course, World War II: We were on Juno Beach on D-Day, on June 6. General Rohmer was there, from Ontario. He was there at the end of the very special day. We had a number of World War II veterans, who sadly have passed on since then, with us at that time. We visited all the World War II cemeteries and all that.

I'll just say a shout-out, if anybody has the chance, to go and visit these memorials. The people at the war memorial commission do an admirable job of maintaining these facilities on these foreign lands in Europe, where our veterans fought. Everyone can be very proud of the work that they do there, and I know the work that you're doing is going to support that.

It was more of a statement than a question, but if you have something to comment there?

Hon. Todd Smith: I appreciate that. I know many people—I unfortunately haven't had the opportunity yet myself to get to Juno Beach, but I've heard so many stories from those who have, how when you close your eyes, you can actually see what it must have been like for our troops coming in from the sea.

To your other point, Bob, about some of the other programs that are available in helping our veterans get back to work, Minister McNaughton at labour, training and skills development and I both announced at about this time last year a new program that's available to military men and women who are leaving the forces when it comes to retraining. It's called Elevate Plus Military, and it's actually run locally here in my region, in Bay of Quinte. We looked to expand it outside to veterans across the province. It gets them special training, particularly in the tech industry.

That's available to military members now and is a program that we announced about a year ago, and we're continuing to make these programs available through the Soldiers' Aid Commission, and the tuition available as part of that \$2,000 as well. It's not just for the military member who is leaving; it's also for family members, as well, who can access that funding for tuition. We realize the retraining is a big part of helping our veterans get back into civilian life and making that transition effectively, so that's why we've added that piece to the new program.

I appreciate the stories, and I know that you were working closely with Seamless Canada, as well, which is an organization—and you brought folks in from Seamless Canada to Queen's Park probably about a year and a half ago or so. We were in the government caucus room, and a number of members of the opposition parties were there, as well, to meet the members of Seamless Canada, just to talk about some of the challenges that family members face when it comes to being transferred across the province. It's maybe not something we consider in all of our ministries, but—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you, Minister. I'm so sorry; I don't mean to cut you off, but I have to.

Now we will move on to our last round of questions by the official opposition. MPP Stevens, go ahead.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you, Minister. The work of the veterans, our Legions and other supportive organizations across the province is what sparked this change, I think, in the first place. As the opposition MPP on this file, I will continue to ensure that this program is delivered, and seamlessly.

The tools we have now to enable legislation are the power to turn the Soldiers' Aid Commission into a modern, accessible tool. We have the opportunity to work closely with the veterans and other stakeholders across Ontario to ensure the new aid commission meets the needs of modern, younger servicemen and women. And yet, I see the pandemic hitting some of these groups harder than others.

We can never get it perfect, I'm sure, but is there anything else you would like to see to support veterans in poverty and homelessness that is not included in this legislation that you might be able to highlight and maybe in the future might have to happen?

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, I think we can always do more and always continue to improve on the programs that we have. As I mentioned, we are working on a large overview of social services right now with our Poverty Reduction Strategy, when it comes to homelessness.

As far as COVID response goes, we were pretty quick to act. Just a week into the pandemic here—it was actually the day that the state of emergency was first declared in Ontario. Myself and my colleague Minister Steve Clark from municipal affairs and housing came out that day with \$200 million in our social services relief fund to help individuals with emergency assistance. Keep in mind, that was before there was ever the CERB. It was never around at that time. There were a lot of people at that time who would have just been laid off and lost their jobs and didn't know how they were going to be able to pay their rent at the end of the month, so that emergency assistance was available.

We provided a lot of funding to our service managers and partners in the municipalities to make sure they were supporting those community organizations that really are the grassroots organizations on the ground to help individuals. Subsequent to that \$200 million, we've continued to add to that, so that's about \$510 million in the social services relief fund now.

There is always more that we can do, MPP Stevens, for sure.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great. Thank you.

I just have a quick question, Chair, through you to the minister. I'm just wondering—in order to confirm that we got this right, it is important to be transparent. I, for one, want to ensure we get this right. Will the data and information about how many veterans applied for the program—and are, if denied, because it may have—just in case this fund or the monies run out. Will it be made public?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, as I mentioned earlier, there's going to be a requirement to report each year back to the Legislature how the money is being spent. There will be that transparency available to all members of the Legislature.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great. Again, just to confirm the question that was asked earlier: If these funds, halfway through, run out, will there be a commitment from the government to provide more money if it's discovered that the monies have run out and it seems to be a popular ask?

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes, we're starting with the \$1.55 million; we feel very comfortable that that will be enough to meet the need, given the modelling that we've done. Of course, like any other program there is always the opportunity at the end of the fiscal to plan for that next fiscal year, and multi-year planning is always continuing for all of our programs. So if there is a demand for more money, that will be something that the ministry will consider.

I think the most important thing right now is to get that mandate expanded and start helping our modern-day veterans and seeing exactly what the uptick will be. We expect there will be a considerable uptick, and we hope there will be, in the number of applications that we're receiving.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay. Great. I didn't mean to sound critical of that, but the last funding—how much more time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): One minute.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: One minute. Thank you. I'm just going to sum up, then. I'm looking forward to seeing how this fund works. I'm hoping that, halfway through—I'm very confident that the Soldiers' Aid Commission fund is going to help several people. However, I'm hoping that it helps with our homeless vets, as well as looking after the new vets that we have that are coming out of war. Of course, like I said in my opening remarks, the wounds that our new vets have are not similar to the wounds that our veterans from the past have had. They have wounds that don't have band-aids on them, that we don't see, and they're coming back from some very brutal days of action.

In saying that, I'm pleased that the government has looked into what I brought forward last year about this time in asking for the soldiers' aid fund to come forward and help out—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you, MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): This concludes all the time we have. Thank you so much, Minister Smith, for your insightful presentation and all the members who asked very important questions.

This committee now stands in recess until 1 p.m. this afternoon. Thank you.

The committee recessed from 1001 to 1300.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order. We will resume public hearings on Bill 202, An Act to continue the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

The remainder of our presenters today have been grouped in threes for each one-hour time slot. Each

presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. a
After we have heard from all three presenters, the
remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions
from members of the committee. This time for questions
will be broken down into two rounds of seven and a half
minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven
and a half minutes for the official opposition, and two
rounds of 4.5 minutes for the independent members as a
group.

Are there any questions at this time? Seeing none, we i
will get right into business.

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Ms. Sherry Culling: Hello, my name is Sherry Culling. Thank you for allowing me to speak today regarding Bill 202.

I just want to give a short summary of what my job entails. I'm an employee of the Royal Canadian Legion Ontario Command, and I'm one of four provincial officers in Ontario. My office is located in North Bay, and my catchment area is south to Orangeville, north to Hornepayne, west to Wawa and White River, east to Mattawa, and Canadian Forces Base North Bay, and I meet with clients at CFB Borden twice a month.

Through the service bureau, primarily we assist veterans, still-serving members and their families with applications for disability benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada, assist with pursuing review and appeal hearings with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, complete file reviews to ensure all potential benefit options are presented and assist with applications for Benevolent Fund assistance. There is definitely no shortage of variety of scenarios that we may assist, as each individual's experience is unique.

As provincial service officers, we act as a gateway to obtaining potential benefits through one individual instead of a variety of departments. We ensure no one is left alone to navigate the system to pursue benefits they may be eligible for. Our services are free and they do not need to be a Legion member to access our services.

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So now to the business at hand: The Soldiers' Aid Commission has been very helpful in meeting the needs of World War II and Korean veterans and their spouses, but now we are asking the commission to step up and assist today's veterans, the still-serving members and their families. The Soldiers' Aid Commission funding would be more realistic in providing and supporting collaborative efforts for a complete solution to coverage. Further funding assistance would assist with covering items for spouses, surviving spouses and their dependents, as they do not receive coverage for many items through Veterans Affairs Canada.

Soldiers' Aid Commission funding would also assist in meeting the needs of veterans who do not have coverage through Veterans Affairs for certain requests that would significantly increase their quality of life. In addition, newer veterans can only receive benefits for their pension conditions. Expenses are higher now and job markets are not the same, especially the past months with COVID-19. The housing markets and expenses are higher and rising every day, and many medical plans are not as comprehensive as they were in the past.

Legion service bureaus in Ontario are experiencing an increase in benefit fund requests, and the majority of the financial requests are coming from more recent veterans or still-serving members other than World War II or Korean veterans. A sample of the type of applications we receive requesting financial assistance include wheelchairs, ramps, dental and denture needs, hearing aids, scooters, furnaces, septic systems, filling oil and propane

tanks, firewood, ostomy supplies, prescription medications, rent, cognitive assessments, windows, doors, new roofs, removing wall mould and installing new drywall.

When veterans and/or their spouses apply for poppy and Benevolent Fund assistance, our goal is to solve the problem by submitting the application and documentation required to the various funds with the goal of receiving a favourable decision. Unless we're unable to solve the problem, meaning obtaining enough monies through the various funds to purchase the items requested, the veteran would unfortunately be turned down.

These past few months, I've been trying to assist an 80-year-old homeless veteran. I met him two years ago at a homeless shelter where he was staying at night, and he told me then he didn't require any assistance. He didn't have any disabilities due to his military service. I gave him one of our comfort backpacks, with toiletries, socks and hand-made wool hat and mittens, snacks, etc. As I was leaving the shelter, the veteran was already giving away the contents of the bag to other people at the shelter. As a side note, the only identification he had is a well-worn senior's card showing his social insurance number.

Fast-track to 2020: I received a call from the motel where the veteran was now living. His rent was in arrears, and unless it was paid up, he was going to be evicted. I contacted the local Legion and they assisted by paying his arrears and giving gift cards for groceries through their poppy funds.

Now to late spring: The veteran was in rent arrears again. He wouldn't allow the motel cleaning staff into his room, and now the rooms surrounding the vet's room were infected with bedbugs. The vet insisted he did not have the bugs in his room. He was evicted and an exterminator was brought in and stated that in all his 18 years in business, he has never seen such an infestation of bedbugs in one room.

The veteran now had worn out his welcome at all the local shelters in town, as well as quite a few motels. A shelter worker finally found a motel that would let him stay in one of the rooms, and I met with the veteran along with the shelter worker and a Legion branch service officer at a park in town. The Legion paid for his taxi fare to and from the park as we didn't want to transport him in our own vehicles.

I explained how I could possibly assist him by applying for disability benefits through Veterans Affairs with his hearing loss, which he definitely had. He finally agreed to sign our forms. We arranged for an appointment with an audiologist and submitted his application to Veterans Affairs. I also submitted an application to Veterans Affairs' emergency fund, and I did request to receive \$2,500 and our local Legion branch provided \$550 towards his rent. The veteran's rent is now paid up to December 1.

In the meantime, the veteran is now showing more signs of cognitive issues, plus now he has an infestation of bedbugs in his new motel room. An assessment was requested through the LHIN due to his cognitive issues, but according to the assessor, he is fine. Not agreeing with

their findings, I arranged to have a capacity assessment completed by a professional assessor at the cost of \$1,500. I requested and received the monies to pay for the assessment from the Royal Canadian Legion District E trust fund.

The results of the testing were positive. A public trustee guardian will now be put into place to take over his finances. He received a favourable decision for his hearing loss claim through Veterans Affairs, and he now receives a monthly pension of \$127 from Veterans Affairs, plus the CPP and OAS. His monthly income is now \$1,700, and his rent is \$1,550.

At this time, we are still trying to obtain an OHIP card for the veteran. We have reached out to every government office we can think of, including a local MPP's office. But since the veteran has no photo ID and has lost his Canadian citizenship papers, we have been unable to have a card issued.

Obviously, this veteran is just one of many more who are going to require more financial assistance in the future, and this is where the Soldiers' Aid Commission is so badly needed. With so many Legion branches still not open, or closed for good, and the uncertainty of our poppy campaign this year due to the pandemic, another source for the Benevolent Fund is desperately needed.

I ask you to please consider the passing of Bill 202. Thank you for your time.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much.

Our last presenters in this round are Pamela Sweeny, executive director, and Juanita Kemp, assistant executive director, of the Royal Canadian Legion Ontario Provincial Command. Welcome. You may begin your presentation by stating your name for the record.

Ms. Juanita Kemp: My name is Juanita Kemp. I'm the assistant executive director of Ontario Provincial Command of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: My name is Pamela Sweeny, the executive director of Ontario Command.

Ms. Juanita Kemp: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today, on behalf of the Royal Canadian Legion Ontario Provincial Command and the 395 Legion branches, in support of Bill 202, An Act to continue the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

Our mission is to serve veterans, including serving veterans, RCMP members and their families, to promote remembrance and to serve our communities and our country. We advocate for the care and benefits of all who serve Canada, regardless of when and where they served. Access to our services are free of cost, and this is for Legion members and non-Legion members.

Ontario Provincial Command and branches assist veterans with programs that are funded by Poppy Trust Funds collected during the poppy campaign as well as by volunteers hard at work catering delicious meals, providing entertainment, hosting dart tournaments etc. at the Legion level.

Branches, such as the Ontario Provincial Command branches and ladies' auxiliary charitable foundation,

provide life-saving equipment to hospitals, fire departments, nursing homes etc. in support of veterans that use those facilities and the greater community, donating usually in excess of half a million dollars annually.

The production of our Military Service Recognition Book, featuring a photo and a storyline of any veteran who has connections to Ontario and served our country, allows us to provide support for veterans going through transition programs such as Project Trauma Support, equine therapy, camps for the children of veterans, and Heroes Mending on the Fly. This is a very short list of some of the agencies that we help.

The Royal Canadian Legion Ontario Provincial Command, over the last two years, has provided \$525,000 toward Operation Service Dog, a program that pairs a veteran with an operational stress injury or post-traumatic stress injury with a service dog in our partnership with Wounded Warriors Canada. Another large donation will be made this November once approval has been made at our provincial executive council.

Ontario Provincial Command created a program called Operation Leave the Streets Behind to assist homeless veterans, near-homeless veterans or those at risk of becoming homeless. Since it's inception in 2010, we've partnered with various agencies by assisting with funds towards peer support workers, supporting veterans transitioning from the streets to housing to ensure they enjoy a safe environment. We have also partnered with several colleges, paying for homeless veterans requiring basic oral hygiene, extractions and dentures. In fact, Operation Leave the Streets Behind has assisted close to 900 veterans in 173 towns in Ontario with items such as first and last month's rent, transportation, food vouchers, clothing vouchers, medical equipment, furniture, storage, utility bills, apartment start-up kits and much more. To date, Ontario Command and the Legion branches have provided over \$2.5 million in support of these programs and items.

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Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Which now leads us to Benevolent Funds for veterans and their dependents. Ontario Provincial Command Benevolent Funds are used toward items such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, scooters, accessibility modifications, roof replacement, prosthetics. They're generally the large requests, totalling several thousands of dollars.

When we receive applications for such requests at Ontario Provincial Command, first and foremost, we verify that this person has served or is still serving and that we can prove there is a financial need. Next, due to the dollar value of the request, we source several areas of funding. For example, if a veteran requires a \$5,700 wheelchair, we would ask that the Royal Canadian Legion, our national headquarters, call Dominion Command for \$1,500. Ontario Provincial Command would provide \$500 and four Legion branches in close proximity to the veteran would be asked for \$500 each. So far we've collected \$4,000 of the \$5,700 cost of the wheelchair. This is where we would reach out to the Soldiers' Aid Commission for the balance of the \$1,700 so we could have a complete solution for this veteran's need.

Once we all agree to support, we each send the cheques to the wheelchair company, and the veteran is notified by either an Ontario Provincial Command service officer or Veterans Affairs, whoever initiated the original request. Cheques are never made out to the veteran or deposited into their personal accounts.

Prior to the introduction of Bill 202, we wouldn't bother contacting the Soldiers' Aid Commission with a request from a veteran who had served in Bosnia, Croatia, Afghanistan etc., as a modern-day veteran doesn't qualify under the current criteria. The adoption of Bill 202 would rectify this.

However, a couple of things need to be addressed. The definition of a "veteran" differs between the Royal Canadian Legion and Veterans Affairs. The Legion defines a veteran as "any person who is serving or who has honourably served in the Canadian Armed Forces, the Commonwealth or its wartime allies, or as a regular member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or as a peace officer in a special duty area or on a special duty operation, or who has served in the merchant navy or ferry command during wartime." Veterans Affairs defines a veteran as "any former member of the Canadian Armed Forces who successfully underwent basic training and is honourably discharged," which omits a still-serving veteran or reservist, as they fall under the Department of National Defence.

We ask your consideration that Bill 202 include all veterans serving or having served.

Our next request is if the Soldiers' Aid Commission provides funding up to \$2,000 per veteran, that any veteran currently on the Ontario Works program or the Ontario Disability Support Program—that those funds not be clawed back. When a serving veteran is injured, whether or not—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I am very sorry, but unfortunately we are out of time.

Now we will begin our two rounds of questions with the government members, for 7.5 minutes. We have MPP McDonell to begin.

Sorry, before we begin, can I ask MPP Jennie Stevens if you could please rotate your device because we are seeing you sideways. Thank you.

Go ahead, MPP McDonell.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Thank you for the work you do, because it really makes a difference. I guess I'm somewhat surprised. The soldiers' aid fund was intended really to be a fund that would take over after the federal fund looked after them, but also the needs of veterans here when it comes to the intention of it—and I'm somewhat surprised that it has fallen short over the last number of years.

Hearing you talk about the example of the wheelchair being sourced through the different areas and you're responding back to the soldiers' aid, you didn't mention about the ability to actually receive funds from the federal program. Is that something that's just not there or something that you don't have an opportunity to access at this time?

I remember it being Pamela who was certainly talking about the—

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Yes. Thank you for the question. We do try to access everything available to us. We would not turn to soldiers' aid initially. It's usually after everything else has been exhausted, that's when we go to soldiers' aid. That was prior to being that—really, those funds weren't accessible to anyone after the Korean War. So now it would be—depending on the criteria, that could be one of the things that we would access, but generally those requests either come to Ontario Command and we work in conjunction with Veterans Affairs Canada, or it's Veterans Affairs Canada that is reaching out because those federal funds do not cover the need.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Now, will there be many—I'm just trying to understand the whole process around there being many opportunities where the [*inaudible*] with federal funding would not be there for basic needs such as wheelchairs or prosthetics or some of the issues and items that you talked about.

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Yes. There are circumstances when a veteran doesn't qualify for—they didn't receive that—the need for the wheelchair due to—they don't have a disability that was created while serving.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Okay.

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: And Sherry, I don't know whether or not you want to answer that as well, being a provincial services officer?

Ms. Sherry Culling: Well, we do access—we ask that they apply through the ADP program, the Assistive Devices Program, especially for something like a wheelchair. But the majority of the veterans cannot afford to pay the 25% that the ADP program doesn't cover, and that's what we ask for—the 25% that's not covered. So yes, we do go to a number of different funds, as many as we can.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Of course, we've extended the eligibility to all current veterans that served in the armed forces. Do you see a major—I guess the [*inaudible*] you're dealing with now, whereas the Second World War and Korean War veterans slowly disappear with age? I guess Afghanistan and Bosnia and these other groups have taken over the biggest need. Would that be fair to say?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Correct.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Okay. Yes, I know, it's—you know our veterans' dinner, where we've had an issue [*inaudible*] November the 11th. The first year that I attended it, in 2011, I was surprised we were having veterans who were from the area coming in, from the Second World War—there was somewhere around 20 of them. I think at the last one it was down to three or four, so those numbers are dwindling.

As I say, this funding is really not intended as [*inaudible*] so it's something we'll have to take back and then look at, because we want to make sure everyone is—Veterans Affairs, the federal fund as much as possible, just to be fair about it. We're trying to fill in the gaps for those we're looking to look after.

Any other changes you'd like to see to the bill that you think have been missed?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Yes, please, if I have a moment to speak?

Mr. Jim McDonell: Sure.

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: If a veteran does not receive a pension from VAC, so they have nothing that has been decided that, “Okay, it’s not a pensionable injury,” and that veteran ends up being on OW or ODSP and the veteran ends up applying a few years later for a disability award—which is basically an award where it could be hearing loss; it could be a loss of a limb; it could be post-traumatic stress injury or lumbar injuries that they actually can attribute to during their service—the veteran can receive a lump-sum payment for whatever loss or percentage of loss Veterans Affairs has considered that they have proven. So if a veteran is unable to work and is on OW or ODSP and receives a disability award for their loss of limb, the Ontario government claws back the funds.

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We’ve had several circumstances where we have housed a veteran, and the shelter portion of their OW or ODSP goes directly to the landlord. When the veteran receives a lump sum of \$12,000, OW and ODSP cut off that funding. They just don’t pay the landlord anymore. What happens is the veteran isn’t even aware of this until they get an eviction notice three months later for not paying rent.

I really politely ask the Ontario government to take a look at this. The federal government is paying for the injury the veteran sustained, and the provincial government claws back that assistance.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Okay.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thirty seconds.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Maybe just in the last 30 seconds, if you have anything else you want to add?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: We completely support this Bill 202. We just hope it will define veterans currently serving and those that have served. The need is getting greater and greater, and we’d like the provincial government to assist as well through soldiers’ aid. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much. MPP Harris, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Mike Harris: Do we quickly have a couple of seconds left?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): No, unfortunately our time is up. We have one more round of questions after this.

We will now move on to the opposition for seven and a half minutes. We will begin with MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I would like to thank Bill Steedman for coming this afternoon and taking some of his time to explain to us what he would like to see in this soldiers’ aid fund. And Sherry from North Bay, also Pamela and Juanita, thank you very much for all of you coming and expressing so many things that are needed to be highlighted within the Soldiers’ Aid Commission.

I’d like to ask a question to Pamela Sweeny from Ontario Command. Again, thank you for your advocacy on this file. I know this is not something that has happened overnight. How long has the Ontario Command been

advocating for expanding this program to younger veterans? And can you kind of highlight quickly on what you would like to see this soldiers’ aid define a veteran as?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Thank you for your question. Again, I’ll reiterate that this fund could be, in addition to what my colleague William Steedman has also stated, that emergency getting the funds out there as fast as possible. We have a pretty quick turnaround time for when we indicate we have a homeless veteran. Because of the 395 branches in Ontario, we don’t have to send something in the mail. We can pick up the phone and phone the branch and say, “We’ve got a guy on the corner here.”

We also have a special section of the Royal Canadian Legion called the Operational Stress Injury, BSO-OSI. They have a group where they do coffee buddy checks. Those guys are great. They can speak properly to another veteran and get them out of the basement to have a cup of coffee.

It’s all a matter of trust and making certain that every veteran is eligible for assistance under this, whether they’re serving right now or whether they have served. There’s such a need out there. I can’t tell you what we go through.

During this COVID-19, even though the Royal Canadian Legion Ontario Provincial Command is close to the public, both Juanita and I have been manning a veterans’ hotline so that they can get in touch with us, because during COVID-19, that even created a bigger problem when restaurants were closed. Anybody on the streets couldn’t go in to use facilities or wash themselves or anything like that.

I don’t know if that properly answers your question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I’ll get back to it. I just wanted to get a definition of “veterans,” but I do have a very important question, and I know that I might run out of time soon, so thank you for that.

Some of our veterans have received injuries, as you stated, like lost limbs in combat or different injuries, and they require the support from the provincial disability programs, like you stated—ODSP. Except when they win insurance settlements, these programs, as you stated, sometimes are considered to be like income, and individuals have seen drastic clawbacks.

Would this be something that you would like to see an amendment to within this bill? I would like if you could expand—first of all, I’d like to ask you, would you like to see this amendment within the bill?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: One hundred and ten per cent.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great, and thank you for that. It is certainly something that we should be looking at to provide exceptional circumstances for our veterans.

Can you expand on why having clawbacks in these situations is not really fair, and what kind of burdens will this cause to the veterans who are receiving these clawbacks? Maybe the stress factor as well, if you could highlight that.

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Certainly. If you or I had health insurance benefits or life insurance and we were working and we lost a limb, we would be compensated for that loss

of limb. Just like post-traumatic stress, invisible injuries or not, it's a disability award because you've lost something in your life, whether it's hearing, whatever. You may not be fit to work.

If you're on OW and they say, "Okay, well, here you go," your \$12,000 or your \$50,000 for not being able to function and the needs you're going to have as you get older—and that's going to cost you money. If your rent is clawed back, then you get evicted and the stress of, "How am I going to pay for this"—you're being compensated; it's not income.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay. One other thing I'm going to get back to is can you expand—and I know that Bill Steedman had specifically asked for us to make sure the veteran immediately receives these funds, instead of having to go through paperwork and wait on what they do through Veterans Affairs Canada. Can you expand on the difference of the definition that Ontario Command has for a veteran compared to what the VAC has for a veteran? Because it's important we consider the expanded definition in programs like this so that we don't lose certain kinds of veterans that so desperately need this program and the level of funds that they will be receiving.

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Yes. The Legion defines a veteran as any person who is serving or has honourably served in the Canadian Armed Forces, the Commonwealth, its wartime allies, or as a regular member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or as a peace officer in a special-duty area or on special-duty operation, or served in the merchant navy or ferry command.

Veterans Affairs: You have to have left the Canadian forces to qualify. Otherwise, it falls under the Department of National Defence the majority of the time.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: So anyone who basically has done basic training also falls under your umbrella. Is that correct?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: That is correct.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Right, basic training. Thank you.

Sherry eloquently stated about us having some in Ontario, having homeless vets. I have homeless vets who have been identified in St. Catharines, and I really feel that no vet should have to deal with poverty and homelessness. I know that the—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much, MPP Stevens. This concludes our first round of questions.

I will now move on to the independent member, MPP Karahalios.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: I just wanted to thank everybody for coming today: Ms. Culling, Mr. Steedman, Ms. Sweeny and Ms. Kemp. I don't have any questions, however, I would like to give my time to any of you to expand on anything that you would like to expand on. Any of them?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Juanita, would you like to say something?

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Mr. Bill Steedman: Thank you for the opportunity, if I may.

Again, I would stress, for this particular fund, the need for speed—it sounds like something out of a Top Gun movie. Veterans Affairs can do the heavy lifting for veterans in the long term; they just can't do it very quickly. The existing service members, people who are already serving—there are some funds that can help them. There are some low-interest loans available, and there are also Benevolent Funds that can help them relatively quickly. But when you're dealing with somebody who is facing homelessness or in desperate conditions of one kind or another, what they need is urgent, speedy help that an advocate can get for them quickly. We can get to VETS Canada within a day—the Legion, not much longer than that; we're talking in terms of maybe of a week or two that they can help. If you can provide one more tool in the tool box that we can access on an urgent basis, I believe that's where you should put this initiative forward.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: What are the existing timelines right now? How long are you waiting to get funding?

Mr. Bill Steedman: Under which program?

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Under the Soldiers' Aid Commission, currently.

Mr. Bill Steedman: Under the existing program, there are almost no applications in my area going out because the World War II vets and the Korean vets have either expired due to old age or what have you, or we've got them into a long-term fix, where VAC is providing some income supports or they've had cash awards and so on.

Until this bill passes the Legislature and allows us to apply it to, say, Bosnia vets or even just people who served in the forces—I knew one guy, for example, who injured his spleen falling from a ladder while on duty, so it could be a variety of issues that the veteran faces that this bill would provide some short-term support for. Again, it's a fund of last resort, and we understand that, but if we can access it very quickly to allow other funds to kick in—with Veterans Affairs, you can request speedy service by indicating that the veteran is in dire straits, and they will respond quicker than the norm, the norm being 14 months at present. We have to bridge that, so we're using every funding method that we can to get them to the long-term solution.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: That's all I have, Madam Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you. Ms. Sherry Culling.

Ms. Sherry Culling: Of course, we're grateful for any assistance the Soldiers' Aid Commission can give to our veterans, but my experience has been that we submit an application, and they only meet maybe once a month, so we can get verbal consent saying that, yes, they've agreed to it, they've called the members, but then the cheques are only written when someone can go in to sign them. So we've waited a couple of months to receive the funding for—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much, Ms. Culling. I'm sorry; we are out of time.

We will now move on to the official opposition for their second round of questions. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you again to all the presenters this afternoon for coming out.

I just want to direct back to Bill's statement. Bill, when you state that you would like to move the work on the system of rapid pace for approval for those in need, would you like to see that as an amendment added to this bill?

Mr. Bill Steedman: Absolutely. If the bill could be formulated in such a fashion—perhaps it could just be done through regulation; an enabling bill could provide a minister the authority to act with regulations. What I've seen in every program that attempts to help the veterans is the bureaucracy sort of takes hold of things. It's in the nature of a bureaucracy to line up their ducks, tick off every box. It's just the way it works. It has worked that way since the Roman Empire, I think you'd agree.

If you can create a mechanism for this fund in such a manner that it can be dispensed very quickly, then that would be a great help, so an amendment would be appropriate.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great. Thank you very much.

Back to Pamela or Juanita: We have some great local people who do work around PTSD in my community and a lot of communities throughout Ontario, as you're much aware. In fact, I've helped support getting a labyrinth in my community to this end.

Can you expand on some of the reasons that you might see veterans come and seek support with mental health issues with your programs, and how this program is much needed for our legionnaires as well as the veterans who come to your community support groups?

Ms. Pamela Sweeny: Juanita, if you can answer that. I know you've been dying to speak, too.

Ms. Juanita Kemp: The problem with veterans who have mental issues is they live in their basements and they don't come out. They need to have an initiative to get involved, and it's sometimes as simple as VetBuild, where they can go and start to work with their hands and become involved with building models. The next thing you know, they're talking, and as they start to talk, they have a partnership and they can peer on each other and actually start to work through some of their mental issues.

This commission can actually help us, because sometimes it needs funding just to get going. It would be nice to see it expand so that there's an opportunity to help those people.

One thing that I want to make sure we understand is the time frame. When they ask for help and the benevolent fund is sent out to the commission or Vets Canada or Legions in general, that time frame needs to be shortened so that we can get the money out and help that veteran get the wheelchair or get onto the ramp to get into the house. Even once a month is a little bit too long.

Like Pamela said, we have 395 branches where I can pick up the phone pretty much at any time of the day or night and get some assistance immediately for a veteran—who we are making sure is a veteran. We verify that service. We make sure that all those checks and balances

are in place so that we're not sending money out where it shouldn't go.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay. Also, maybe because some of the veterans who have some mental illness issues also would be on some kind of ODSP or OW, would you like to see an amendment made to this piece of legislation to say, privy to clawbacks for programs, that clawbacks do not happen?

Ms. Juanita Kemp: Yes, I would. I would like to see it phrased in a way so that this is not income. This is a grant. This is something that is being given to the veteran, and it shouldn't have any clawbacks attached to it at any time.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great. Thank you for that great clarification, because I think it's very important that if we're giving in one hand, we don't take from the other. That's a very, very crucial part of why this bill was brought to the floor. The reason it was brought to the government was when I stood up a year ago in Queen's Park and I spoke about a veteran who was homeless and actually was looking for access, the definition of this veteran did not fall underneath this Soldiers' Aid Commission.

In saying that, are you in support of the definition the Legion of Ontario has for a veteran?

Ms. Juanita Kemp: Yes, I am, because I think a veteran is a veteran. It shouldn't have restrictions on where they served or how they served or are they still serving. I think that has to have a much broader base.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great. Chair, how much more time do I have?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): A few seconds.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: A few seconds? I just want to thank everyone, then, for coming this afternoon. I'll make sure that we look into those amendments.

I want to make sure that you all realize that on both sides of the House, we're working to make sure that veterans are looked after. Especially myself being the critic for Legion and military affairs and my colleagues who joined on this conversation today, we have been your voice for veterans for Ontario. I want to make sure that the people who make the budgets and the young and the old veterans are—make sure that this money is given to them.

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Is there anything that one of you would like to elaborate on that you didn't have a chance to this afternoon—with my couple of seconds left?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Okay. Thank you very much. We will now go back to MPP Karahalios.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: I have no questions at this time, Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): We will now move on to the government. MPP Harris.

Mr. Mike Harris: I'm really excited to get to participate in this committee today. I've had a lot of family members and friends who have served over the years, whether that be in World War II, peacekeeping and, of course, now with some of the conflicts that we've seen in the Middle East and Afghanistan over the last little while.

SOLDIERS' AID COMMISSION,
SCARBOROUGH
TRUE PATRIOT LOVE FOUNDATION
DURHAM COMMUNITY LEGAL CLINIC

have with us John Stapleton, the vice-chair and commissioner of the Soldiers' Aid Commission, Scarborough.

Welcome. You have seven minutes for your presentation, and you may begin by stating your name for the record.

Mr. John Stapleton: My name is John Stapleton. I'm vice-chair of the Soldiers' Aid Commission and I've been a commissioner for the past 17 years.

One hundred and five years ago, our predecessors brought forth in Ontario a piece of legislation whose measures were meant to ease the burden of what came to be Ontario veterans of two great wars and Korea. Its intent was to ensure them a safe and secure homecoming, while assisting those back home who were preparing to receive them.

Now, we are engaged in a new age of remembrance that tests whether we can continue to meet that challenge.

As a commissioner with the Soldiers' Aid Commission, I can reminisce about the long days appearing before Legion service officers in Picton, in Elliott Lake, in Burlington, Hawkesbury, Toronto and Aurora, and our long hours trying to explain why the Ontario Soldiers' Aid Commission could only support veterans of expeditionary forces into Korea and the two World Wars.

We had no answer as to why we could not assist further. We had no answers to their questions. We had no answers as to why we could not do our part. And we walked out of cold Legion halls in 2003, 2007 and 2010 and after that, again, with no answers—until now.

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With the passage of Bill 202, we can stand proudly and do our part, what no other province or territory now does, and to fulfill the mandate of the commission that it is so obviously our mandate to fulfill.

The passage of the bill into law will commemorate the services to our country by those who are and who have been dedicated to the dignity, the sacrifice, the loyalty and the sanctity of those who have served Canada in uniform honourably.

I want to quote from the dedication to our publication on the centenary of the Soldiers' Aid Commission in 2015 by Ontario's Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour the Honourable Elizabeth Dowdeswell.

"Ontario society has changed enormously over the past 100 years. We have gone from a largely agrarian culture to a predominately urban-based population, where the knowledge economy and technological advancement are highly valued....

"This is why we should never take for granted the foundation on which we have built our province.... The Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario was born out of a need to assist and integrate veterans returning from First World War battlefields into civilian life. Over the decades its work paralleled the efforts of governments in creating societal policies and programs. Today and under the auspices of" what's now the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, "it continues to serve world war and Korean veterans and their families ...

"There are other veteran assistance programs and newer non-profit organizations that tend to the needs of soldiers.... However, nothing can replace the historical and social importance of the Soldiers' Aid Commission. Our country and province owe a debt of gratitude to the selfless citizens and volunteers that have committed themselves to the health and welfare of those who fought for us during Canada's formative years."

It is important to note that the predecessor program to what now is Veterans Affairs Canada, or VAC, did not come into being until 1944, 29 years after the Soldiers' Aid Commission came into existence in 1915. However, over the ensuing 76 years since 1944, no one then, and only a very small minority since, ever considered the SAC to have outlived its role, and it is clear that the Soldiers' Aid Commission is still needed today.

Over the next year, the Soldiers' Aid Commission will take applications from a much wider amplitude of veterans, not just in terms of age, but in terms of their service. Our commission will change, and it will change for the better.

My fellow commissioners and I have advocated mightily over the years for the extension of the mandate that you see in this bill.

On a personal note, I would like to express my gratitude for an important provision that will be in the regulations. I have been told that war veterans receiving social assistance in the form of ODSP or Ontario Works will have Soldiers' Aid Commission benefits exempted from income charges under these programs. Nothing could be more important for veterans who have, unfortunately, fallen into hard times and into poverty.

In closing, I want to note that prominent historians have also expressed interest in the history and in the Soldiers' Aid Commission. In January 2017, Margaret MacMillan wrote to say, "I have been able to read ... (your history) online. It is a fascinating and generally edifying story. And wonderful photographs too. Congratulations on adding to Ontario's history."

That's my presentation. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much. Next, we have Nick Booth, the chief executive officer from True Patriot Love Foundation. Welcome.

Mr. Nick Booth: Good afternoon. It's an honour to appear before you today. My name is Nick Booth. I'm the chief executive officer of True Patriot Love Foundation here in Toronto. Thank you for the invitation appear before the Standing Committee on Social Policy as Bill 202 is reviewed. I was delighted to have been present with Minister Smith at the launch event, and I'm fully in support of its proposals.

For some context, True Patriot Love Foundation is Canada's leading national foundation supporting its military. We exist to support serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces, veterans and their families by raising awareness around the challenges of military service and funding much-needed programs in local communities in Ontario and across the country that address these issues. We work closely with the Department of

We also have with us today Omar Ha-Redeye, the executive director, and Reid Jackson, community legal worker, from the Durham Community Legal Clinic. Thank you so much for being with us. You have seven minutes. Please begin by stating your name for the record.

Mr. Reid Jackson: My name is Reid Jackson. I'm a community legal worker with the Durham Community Legal Clinic. I will be starting our submissions and then passing them over to Mr. Ha-Redeye to finish.

I am now going to take you through a scenario concerning a client we may serve at our clinic. The names have been changed, as have many of the facts, to protect any clients from being identified.

John Veteran is a 39-year-old man who has served his country at home and overseas in Afghanistan. As a line technician with the Canadian Forces, John took advantage of the Helmets to Hardhats program to retrain [*inaudible*]. Unfortunately, in his new occupation, John was injured on the job, wrenching his back in a sprain-strain injury. John is able to apply for health care and loss-of-earnings benefits for his injury under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act. However, John may not qualify for loss-of-earnings benefits immediately and may have to appeal in order to receive those benefits. He would then be forced to apply for Ontario Works, which is not enough to support his family. As a result, he will find himself in arrears of rent. This new hardship would put additional stress on his marriage and has the potential to destroy his family unit.

At this juncture, John may be tempted to return to work or seek alternate employment, even if he is not fully healed. This act of desperation can lead to an Ontario Works overpayment and further injury.

Unable to pay his rent, John will be issued an N4, a notice to end his tenancy early due to nonpayment of rent. He will then have to attend a hearing at the Landlord and Tenant Board. If he attends unrepresented, he may not be prepared for what to expect and may miss out on an opportunity to sign up for mediation and avoid a hearing altogether.

Without legal representation, John will be unaware of the hearing process and the arguments available to him to stop his eviction. If John is fortunate, he may be able to come to an agreement with his landlord and work out a payment plan that would allow him to reduce or eliminate his arrears. Under the changes of this government from Bill 184, this agreement can now happen without any independent legal advice.

Should John be late with his payment, his landlord will then be able to apply for an ex parte order to have him evicted without a hearing. John will have 10 days to file a motion to set aside and request a hearing so that he can present his side of the story. As John moves through this process, his chance of success, unfortunately, becomes increasingly slim.

The unfortunate reality is that poverty is often a self-perpetuating cycle, and once one joins the ranks of the impoverished in Ontario, it takes considerable effort, along with outside assistance and empowerment, to pull oneself out.

To speak to that, I'm now going to pass the floor over to Mr. Ha-Redeye.

Mr. Omar Ha-Redeye: My name is Omar Ha-Redeye. I am the executive director of the Durham Community Legal Clinic.

Bill 202 has the potential to ensure that veterans in Ontario are not forced to suffer the scenario that my colleague Reid Jackson has just described. Proper supports and intervention for those in poverty can break the cycle even before it begins. Had John been able to access the Soldiers' Aid Commission services, he may have been able to secure a grant to help pay his rent while his workers' compensation claim was reconsidered. We could have averted the legal process entirely by expanding the commission's mandate under section 11(a) of Bill 202 to include him in the definition of an eligible veteran.

Approximately 650,000 veterans in Canada—well over a third of them live in Ontario. Approximately 3,000 to 5,000 veterans in Canada are homeless, which is about 4.6% to 7.7% of all veterans; an estimated less than 1% of all Canadians are homeless, which demonstrates the disproportionate rate of homelessness among veterans. Fortunately, the best supports that Canadian veterans currently report are shelters and the services provided by Veterans Affairs Canada, especially as it relates to detox and drug and alcohol abuse. The lack of affordable housing is generally one of the worst issues that they face.

Various studies suggest that post-traumatic stress disorder is rarely the underlying reason for homelessness, even among veterans who suffer from it. Instead, some of the pathways that have led veterans into homelessness are poverty, lack of affordable housing, job loss or instability, mental illness and addictions, physical health problems, family or domestic violence, and family or marital breakdown. These are factors that many Ontarians, especially those living in poverty, struggle with all their lives. What sets veterans apart, according to Debbie Lowther of VETS Canada, is that they not only deal with these same issues, but they also struggle with that very important transition from military to civilian life.

Homeless veterans are close to approximately 5% of all homeless persons in Canada, but our hope is that this legislation will also start the process to end the suffering of the 95% of the homeless who have not been properly served by this province.

The plight of veterans has been politically effective in Canadian history in helping Ontarians understand the need for social supports, because we recognize that the sacrifices that our veterans make and potentially the traumas that they endure are directly a result of their service.

The law has made enormous progress in recognizing the role of trauma for other vulnerable populations; for example, those struggling with drug addiction. Many of these individuals also have a history of stress, trauma, physical or sexual abuse, parental neglect or other social determinants. Properly understanding the role of trauma in the lives of Ontarians helps inform the need for a strong and robust social support system.

This legislation acknowledges that it is possible to reduce homelessness and poverty in Ontario. What it does

not necessarily recognize is that if we can end poverty for veterans, we can do so for all Ontarians. By committing to ending homelessness and poverty in Ontario for all Ontarians, we would also be alleviating poverty for veterans. This is how we support our veterans, and this is how we honour them the most.

Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much. We will begin our rounds of questions today. We'll start with our independent member, MPP Karahalios, for four and a half minutes of questions.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Thank you, gentlemen, for presenting today.

Hello, Omar. It's good to see you again; it has been a while.

This question is for any of you who would like to answer it: Is there anything else you would like to see in the bill in terms of anything being taken away, added to it—any amendments?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Would anyone like to answer the question? Please raise your hand.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Okay. Seeing none, then, that's it. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Okay. We will move on to the government members. MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I want to thank the presenters today.

I particularly wanted to say to Mr. Booth how much I admire the organization True Patriot Love and all the work that you've done throughout Canada, and Ontario especially.

I have a few questions which I think will deal mostly with Mr. Stapleton and Mr. Booth.

Let's start with Mr. Stapleton. Mr. Stapleton, my understanding is that you are the vice-chair of the Soldiers' Aid Commission now and that you have been on the commission for some time. Is that correct?

Mr. John Stapleton: Correct—for the last 17 years.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I thought I heard the minister say that in his remarks. Some of your colleagues have been there an equally long amount of time serving on the commission. Is that right?

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Mr. John Stapleton: Yes. The chair has been there for 18 years. He's got a year of seniority on me. But the others have all been there from a period of about five through 12 years.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Right. That's a very long period of time. My understanding from the minister is that your organization has been, shall I say, lobbying quite intensively over many, many years to have this kind of expansion happen. You said in your submission here today that sometimes you had no answers as to why we weren't covering vets from other conflicts and peacekeeping missions and things when you left—I think you said you left halls in 2003, 2007 and 2010, and you really had no answers for them as to why it wasn't expanded to cover all vets.

I was wondering if you could just comment on your advocacy over the years, many years, and why you think this expansion is so important to allowing the commission the ability to function as it was really intended to do way back in 1915.

Mr. John Stapleton: I think we became embarrassed over a period of years that we received an allocation each year that we couldn't spend. The reason we couldn't spend it is because of the attrition in terms of the veterans. We had lost, of course, some years ago all the World War I veterans, and now we're seeing a large attrition of the World War II and Korea veterans.

You have to remember that the youngest possible World War II veteran right now, legally, was born in 1927, and they'd be 93 years old right now. The youngest Korean veteran, of course, would be born in 1935, so you're talking about someone in their 80s. So we were starting to lose those people, and we started covering mostly—so we were in a position where the commission would become moribund, simply because of lack of demand.

But the other point, and I think you heard it strongly from Mr. Booth, is that during those years, once we got involved in Afghanistan—we had a long, long period of time where Canadian soldiers were involved in peacekeeping missions. Some of those were quite dangerous, as he mentioned: Kosovo, Cyprus and others. But once we got into Afghanistan, I can tell you that whenever I went into a Legion hall to say what the Soldiers' Aid Commission actually did—you really had to go in there in a suit of armour because there was just such emotion coming from the service officers saying, "Why can we not serve the people who are identical in terms of their sacrifice to those in the expeditionary forces of the two great wars and Korea?" And as I said before, we really didn't have an answer.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Right. Well, that's right, and we really appreciate the fact that you've been going in there, taking it for us. But now we're going to expand this thing, and we're very grateful to be in the position to do that. I know in my riding, I have the Fairbank Legion, which is Branch 75. I don't know if you visited that one.

It really is important that we expand this to all of our veterans. It's only fair and right. So I'm glad for your relentless advocacy on this issue.

The other thing I wanted to ask was that we're now expanding to mental health supports, amongst others. Of course, Mr. Booth had talked about how important mental health supports are. Some of our earlier presenters this afternoon as well had talked about that. Do you think the addition of these supports, also employment supports, would have addressed some of the applications you've seen in the past? Maybe after you're finished, Mr. Booth may want to comment on how important it is that we extend this offering also to families of veterans.

Mr. John Stapleton: We're going through a process right now. You can imagine that what we've been doing over the—since the start of the new millennium, we've been looking at hearing aids, leaky roofs, dentures,

eyeglasses, that sort of thing, the parts that are not covered by other programs like the assistive devices program. Now, as we venture out to a much wider, as I said, amplitude of veterans, we're going to be facing a whole new series of types of needs, and that's what we're going to do over the next week. I can't tell you how many meetings we've got set up to talk about exactly what we're going to see, what we're going to hear, how we're going to adjudicate that.

So I think it would be naive for me to tell you what the range of items, services and supports that we're going to be looking at are, because I don't think we know what those are yet. We only know them from the applications that have come in over the years in protest from younger veterans. They make those applications in protest, knowing that they couldn't be served; they were making a statement.

So we do know a little there, but at the same time, the amplitude of those supports and services that we're able to fund is going to be much larger, much more intricate and much broader. That would be my opening comment on that.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Mr. Booth, would you like to comment?

Mr. Nick Booth: It's absolutely imperative that mental health is included, because physical injuries and mental health rarely are separate. You can debate all day which causes which, but it's very important that they're seen jointly.

We also have to break the stigma around mental health. We all have mental health, like we all have physical health. Some days we're healthy and some days we're not—that goes the same with mental well-being. We know that veterans have good days and bad days, and being able to support them through that as they go through the challenges of transition and coping with the memories that they have to—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much. I'm so sorry, but our time is up.

Now we will move on to the official opposition. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to all the gentlemen this afternoon for presenting. I listened intently to your presentations.

Being a mother of a son who participated in the Afghanistan war, in the Royal Canadian Navy, I would say this Soldiers' Aid Commission Act is a step in the right direction for all of the people who are interested—for the Soldiers' Aid Commission to be able to help the men and women who served with him.

I'm going to direct this question to Mr. Stapleton.

First of all, you are the front-line staff who help the front-line military persons, and I want to thank you for all the work that you have done. We have seen some great local people who do work around PTSD in my community as well as ridings across Ontario—big organizations and outreach staff and volunteers.

Can you or would you expand on some of the reasons that you might see clients come into your office with

mental health issues, and on how this program is so needed to support them?

Mr. John Stapleton: First, I'd like to clarify that in terms of the front line—we only receive written applications; we don't actually see the veteran. We feed the applications through the Legion services officers, and they fill out a very standard veterans' affairs form and send it through to us, and we adjudicate it from there.

Especially in terms of the applications we're seeing now—up till now we only considered the Korean War and, as a practical matter, the Second World War. We are seeing very, very old veterans and very, very old widows of those veterans, and so what we tend to see are not applications based on mental health concerns; what we are seeing, in many cases, are applications that are based on people trying to stay in their homes and not go into long-term care. Often it's a small thing, whether it's a leaky roof or windows, or the sort of things that would prevent them from going [*inaudible*] to move on. Those are the sorts of things we fund.

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So as a practical matter, we see very, very little of that, except, again, as I explained earlier, that we have gotten many what I would call “protest applications” from people who know they're not going to be eligible and who apply anyway. I wouldn't say we routinely turn them down, but we certainly know that we are going to receive applications from people whose—part of their suite of needs that we could help with financially are going to include mental health and other issues, including various physical health issues also.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great. Thank you for the clarification at the beginning as well. I really appreciate that and I appreciate your answer.

Just to continue on that and ride on the coattails of that question: I know we always have to have a certain cut-off, a cut-off line, of course, in anything that we do. Is there any—I guess I'll go this way: Do you often find that some of the supports, so for hearing aids or devices that they need, or to stay in their home, like you said, leaky roofs or new windowing or whatever—do you find that it often requires or exceeds the \$2,000 amount? And with the numbers increasing—of how many vets, new modern-day vets as well as veterans of past, who are still veterans—do you think that these are going to be sufficient enough funds?

Mr. John Stapleton: The good answer to that is that we are only one funder, as far as that goes. Especially you mentioned, I believe, your son being in the navy; of course, you have the Royal Canadian Naval Benevolent Fund, which is one of the active funds still. So we work with those people. We see them at the conventions, we see them at the Legion offices, and we work with them very closely, and the poppy funds and the various other funds that are out there.

As we all know now, if you get a pair of hearing aids, you're talking somewhere—the non-ADP portion of that can easily be up \$5,000, \$6,000, or \$7,000, and we can only cover a maximum of \$2,000. But we work closely

with the poppy funds and the other funds that are available to make sure that we can provide that money. There are very few applications where we can't put it all together by taking all the funds. We've been very fortunate that the poppy funds over the years have become a bit more flush than they were, and that has allowed us to do a bit more. We have yet to see an application for a special need when we couldn't all get together and make it happen.

But I think you're right: There are going to be times when we're going to see larger-scale needs that might really tax the resources of all these agencies put together, but, hopefully, we'll be in a position to do that. If the government needs to up the amount of \$2,000, let's hope that's just in the regulations and that, from time to time, we'll be able to see a higher amount when that becomes either necessary or more realistic.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Glad to see that we'll be re-evaluating it as well. From the minister's remarks this morning, I know it will be a living, open, transparent document that will be re-evaluated on a yearly basis, which is really, really good for the people of Ontario and our veterans to know that.

I just want to know if there's anything else that you, or any of the gentlemen who have presented this afternoon, would want to say or anything else that you would like to see included in this legislation or put in place as regulation in the legislation. Is there anything that comes to mind, to the forefront, that we can highlight—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I'm so sorry, but we are out of time.

We will move on to the second round of questions now with the government members. MPP Roberts.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you so much to all of our presenters for the phenomenal work that each of you do to support our veterans and our armed forces members. It's deeply appreciated and, of course, top of mind as we move closer to Remembrance Day. I just got a notice on my phone that the Legions have announced that they're now going to have tap boxes for poppies. That's exciting news, I'm sure, for a lot of us.

I have a question—and Mr. Booth, you touched on this a bit, but I'll direct the question both to you and to the gentlemen from Durham Community Legal Clinic. I'm wondering, of the veterans you guys serve, how many of them you have seen who are dealing with either mental health issues or issues finding employment. Is that a need that you have seen out there amongst veteran populations these days that could be met by expanding the eligibility, as has been proposed by this bill? Perhaps we can start with you, Mr. Booth, and then head to our friends in Durham.

Mr. Nick Booth: Thanks. The issue of unemployment is an interesting one because I think the media likes to get hold of this notion of streets covered in homeless veterans and of veterans being unemployed. That actually isn't the reality, but there's a very significant issue of underemployment. What you tend to find is that veterans will get a job immediately post-service, and companies in

Ontario and other provinces will put out their hand and say, "We're veteran-friendly"; but they don't do enough to help those veterans understand the transition and go through that with them.

It's very difficult. You've been in a very structured environment for all of your career. I was talking quite recently, actually, with the wife of a Canadian submariner who had been 35 years in the Royal Canadian Navy. Can you imagine being 35 years as a submariner and then you come out, and all of a sudden, you're thrown into civilian life? You've got a job: You've gone straight back as a civilian contractor on the base, which speaks to how difficult you've found it to leave.

So the issue is underemployment, not unemployment, and I think there's more that we can do to help Ontario companies to put up their hands as employers, but then, having done that, also to put in place support programs such as mentoring, such as internal veterans' groups, to help catch those veterans so they don't bounce straight back out again, because that just leads to the anxiety. That would be one of my pleas.

The other one would be greater coordination. I was going to make that to Ms. Stevens's point. I think that there are a number of these organizations—ours included, the Legion, regimental associations and benevolent funds—but I don't think the coordination on the ground is always very good. So my other plea would be that we put in place in Ontario, through something like the Respect Forum or other initiatives, a better way for the organizations at the community level to actually understand what provisions are available in that locality, and then topping up or campaigning for change where it's needed, because too often, everybody can be working in silos.

There would be my two pleas: greater coordination and helping people understand the difficulty of transition, not just being kind enough to hire a veteran.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Sure. I appreciate that. Our friends in Durham, Omar or Reid, either/or?

Mr. Reid Jackson: Sure. I can second that call, that removing silos and breaking down those barriers is absolutely essential.

What I'd probably highlight is how significant this particular commission was in transforming the perspectives around employment, as well as mental health, in Ontario. If you look at what happened in Ontario prior to 1915, we had the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, the House of Industry of 1837, which created workhouses, and then the Houses of Refuge Act in 1890 trying to do something province-wide. There was still a lot of stigma historically around issues of poverty or underemployment and mental health, and the soldiers' commission really did transform a lot of those perspectives to create a more humane understanding as to how we assist individuals. That really only took off after World War II, but again, with veterans.

The reason I like to highlight the connection or the interconnection between these issues is that as we expand the programs with veterans, as we very much should, and break down those silos, break down those barriers and

understand the interconnection of these issues, we can also then realize that that's a template for helping the rest of Ontarians, especially those who are in difficult circumstances and find themselves in poverty.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I appreciate that.

Flipping over to Mr. Stapleton, obviously you've got a long and distinguished track record with the Soldiers' Aid Commission. The minister spoke a little bit about this this morning, but I'm wondering if you can touch on how we might be able, as part of this modernization, to increase awareness of the Soldiers' Aid Commission. We're going to be touching a whole new body of veterans who haven't been served up to this point. How do we make sure that they're aware of these services and that this program of last resort is available? And how do we make sure their family members are also aware of it? I know that a lot of the work the Soldiers' Aid Commission has done in the past has supported widows or family members of those who have served. Any thoughts you have on those issues would be great.

1440

Mr. John Stapleton: First of all, I'd say that all of the commissioners have long thought of the Soldiers' Aid Commission as one of Ontario's best-kept secrets. Getting the word out was one of our real difficulties. What it involves is just a lot of hard work and getting out to community organizations.

It's great to see the legal clinic represented here, and Mr. Booth's True Patriot Love Foundation. We need all of those benevolent organizations, the Legions, the service officers—and Veterans' Affairs; I can tell you that in their move of a lot of their administration to Charlottetown, we got lost in the shuffle and in many cases we didn't get the applications that we should have been getting.

I think we're going to need to work with the federal government, we're going to need to work through VAC and others, through the municipalities, through the various different organizations—definitely the poppy funds. As we see with the Legion, especially during the pandemic—they certainly have their own issues in terms of keeping the Legions open, so that's going to be a big part of it also. But I think that if we just work on all cylinders, so to speak, with all the different agencies involved, and then are getting deep down into the service organizations that serve families too, then we're going to be able to have the type of impact and outreach that we need to see and which you're calling for.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Chair, how much time remaining?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): None; I'm sorry.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Okay. Thanks so much, everyone. Cheers.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Back to the official opposition. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I would like to ask Omar a couple of questions about his presentation this afternoon. I would like to thank him for and I appreciate the sentiments around the poverty, its history and how veterans have helped push us to a more just society.

Would you like to see a goal within this legislation that states the eradication of poverty and homelessness?

Mr. Omar Ha-Redeye: I would certainly think that wording along those lines would demonstrate how important, first of all, it is to eradicate homelessness and poverty among veterans. Then, as we've seen historically from this particular commission, that could very well be subsequently used as a template to do that for the rest of society, which would be a very good thing.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Should that rule be extended to all housing and social assistance in the legislation?

Mr. Omar Ha-Redeye: I think it would be difficult to do in this particular statute. But I might borrow from Mr. Stapleton's recent study that came out just this week, unrelated to his current role, which talked about the cuts to social assistance services in 1995. Adjusted for the consumer price index, we still are lower today, in 2020, as I understand it, by about \$79 per month for Ontario Works than it was in 1995. We actually do have quite a bit of a long way to go, when you combine the cuts to social assistance with the increase in costs of rental housing and the costs of groceries, for example, going up—in particular healthy groceries, which is part of Mr. Stapleton's study. We have a very dire situation. What I'm trying to illustrate is that the circumstances of the veterans are not separate from those who are similarly situated in society and have some of the same issues.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: ODSP clawbacks are something I see a lot of in my office right now, especially because of the pandemic and CERB. Can you highlight why it is important that this type of support is not clawed back, that it is put into this piece of legislation? And what results when sometimes a client did not expect that to happen? Can you tell me some of the results that you see?

Mr. Omar Ha-Redeye: Certainly. I will note at the outset that Mr. Stapleton had indicated that it will probably be in the regulation that this will not affect ODSP. But you're right, we did see this with CERB, where low-income individuals are by their very nature precarious. I think Reid Jackson can speak to that a little bit further.

Mr. Reid Jackson: I can say that I've personally fielded a number of calls over the course of the summer from low-income residents of Durham region who have suddenly found themselves in dire straits when they have realized that they are going to be facing ODSP clawbacks as a result of taking on some CERB payments and that payment being considered income for ODSP's purposes. We can see the frankly disastrous effects that that has had on their lives going forward. It transformed them from believing that they were in a position where they were finally maybe able to start digging themselves out of poverty, only to wake up the next day and realize that they are in a much worse position than they had anticipated—

Interjection.

Mr. Reid Jackson: Thank you.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Continue on. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to cut you off. Sorry.

Mr. Reid Jackson:—which then of course leads to other effects in terms of mental health and overall has a very negative impact on their lives and their ability to participate in society as a whole.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Right. Okay, great. Thank you.

I want to go back to ask any of the gentlemen—how much more time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Three minutes.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great. Thank you. Wow, we've got lots of time then.

I'd like to go back to ask the gentleman from the Together We Stand foundation—I believe that's what it's called. I just want to know, is there anything that is not included in this legislation that you would like to see put in place in regulation? I guess I'm asking Mr. Booth.

Mr. Nick Booth: Sorry, you referred to Together We Stand, rather than True Patriot Love.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Oh, I'm sorry.

Mr. Nick Booth: I wasn't sure if they were still on the call. Forgive me.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: No, I'm sorry.

Mr. Nick Booth: No, don't worry at all; too many acronyms in our lives.

I think the legislation is very well framed. I agree with it, with all the key objectives. What I would say, and it was referenced a few minutes ago, is about the communication around it, because I think just bringing it in without necessarily a parallel communication strategy may not be fully effective.

I spent quite a lot of the last six months working with both provincial and federal governments on ensuring the veterans are getting included in the different pandemic relief programs. We were delighted back in April to have successfully included veterans within the Emergency Community Support Fund provisions that came out across the whole of Canada, and yet we argued with the government that without a veteran-specific communication channel and distribution process, that wouldn't be effective. They didn't necessarily agree with us, and yet we gave them some data recently to show that of all the emergency community funds that came out, only 0.4% of that money reached veterans.

So I think it's very important not necessarily to change the provisions, but to think about how we communicate those both formally and informally within the many different veterans networks, because veterans are—you will know, ma'am, as a mother of a veteran, and thank you for your son's service, by the way. You will know that they're a breed apart, and actually making sure that they can communicate amongst each other about this opportunity would be as effective as anything else.

I would really stress to the committee and the government to think about how it announces this and then think about how it promotes it to the—because you know, even Veterans Affairs Canada are only in touch with about a third of all veterans in Canada. There are so many of them who are out there suffering in silence, who aren't reaching

any of these programs. It's really important we find a way to get this help to them.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Great. And I would like to thank your organization for helping the military families as well. Your organization prides itself on avoiding the duplications of efforts by many organizations. The program is one that is a last resort for veterans that need it, this program that we're reviewing today. Do you see other criteria that should be included in this program?

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The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I'm so sorry, but we are out of time.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Seeing as the independent member does not have any questions for this round of panellists, I would like to thank you all for your presentations this afternoon.

TOGETHER WE STAND

SERGEANT DARREN REID

MAJOR MARK BOSSI

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): We have our next round of presenters. They are slowly joining us. Good afternoon. We are 10 minutes ahead of schedule.

We will begin with Mr. Rick Seymour, the chief executive officer, and Stephanie Shapiro, the chief operating officer, from the Together We Stand foundation, Toronto. Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us. You may begin your presentation by stating your name for the record.

Mr. Rick Seymour: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Rick Seymour, CEO of the Together We Stand foundation.

Ms. Stephanie Shapiro: And my name is Stephanie Shapiro. I'm the chief operating officer for the Together We Stand foundation.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): You may begin.

Ms. Stephanie Shapiro: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for inviting us to speak with you today about the modernized Soldiers' Aid Commission. I'm Stephanie Shapiro, the chief operating officer of the Together We Stand foundation, a nationally registered organization created to honour and thank Canada's military families. Joining me today is Rick Seymour, the foundation's chief executive officer.

This foundation is especially important to me, as it was founded by my parents, Rick and Lillian Ekstein. My parents are the children of Holocaust survivors and are first-generation Canadians. My grandparents came to this country in hopes of living in a free and democratic place where there was ample opportunity to prosper. Because of their upbringing and immense dedication to the well-being and foundations of this country, Rick and Lillian decided that it was time to give back to Canada and honour those who put their lives on the line in defence of these Canadian values: the military community.

Upon reflection and many discussions with military members, including the Chief of the Defence Staff, Rick and Lillian decided that while serving members wear the uniform, those that stand beside them—their families—need and deserve just as much recognition as their loved one who serves.

In December 2017, Rick and Lillian gifted a \$50 prepaid Visa to 2,500 Canadian military families whose family member was deployed over the holiday season, to say thank you for their sacrifices in hopes that this small recognition would brighten the holiday season that they would be spending without their loved one.

My dad travelled that year with the Chief of the Defence Staff to visit with our deployed members overseas. When he was introduced and identified as one of the individuals who delivered these gifts to their families, he was embraced and told many times over that not only was it incredibly meaningful for two civilians to honour their families in this way, but that no one had ever taken the time to recognize and thank military families before. And thus the Together We Stand foundation was born.

I need to be clear: Military families are strong and independent and patriotic. They do not need charity. What they do need is acknowledgement and, in certain circumstances, support. Not a handout, but instead a hand up.

I'd now like to pass the mike over to my colleague Rick.

Mr. Rick Seymour: Thanks, Stephanie.

Over the past few years since that first gift, Together We Stand has expanded our Operation Care Package by calling on some of the biggest companies in Canada to stand with Canadian military families. We're really proud that since 2017, we've delivered over 7,000 care packages filled with a variety of gift cards and product offerings to families at 29 military bases from coast to coast to coast.

But this is just one of our operations. Last year, to honour and thank all military families, not just those with a deployed one overseas during the holiday season, we created Military Family Appreciation Day, or MFAD. By working closely with members of Parliament from every federal political party, Together We Stand established a nationally recognized day for Canadian military families. Through the introduction and passage of a unanimous consent motion in the House of Commons on June 19, 2019, we're proud to say that the third Friday of every September is now known as Military Family Appreciation Day across Canada, the first and only day in Canada that's dedicated to our military families.

This year, MFAD was celebrated online through a digital recognition campaign. We are incredibly grateful for the massive outpouring of support that military families received on MFAD from notable Canadians like Colonel Chris Hadfield, Hayley Wickenheiser, Brian Burke and various politicians, including Premier Ford, Minister Sajjan and the Prime Minister. During this inaugural digital campaign, over 18 million Canadians were made aware of and reached through the campaign, and many took the opportunity to say thank you to our military families.

But this is just not enough; 2020 has been a very challenging year for all of us, to say the least, but for

Canada's military, the year has been particularly trying. With extended or unexpected deployments, an increase in imposed restrictions, support systems stripped away and isolation on a scale that has never been experienced, military families were and continue to be placed under enormous stress.

While the country shut down, the military stood steadfast, ready to deploy away from their loved ones, but also here at home on the front lines. This was evident from the over 1,700 members who participated in Operation Laser to support COVID efforts in long-term-care facilities in Quebec and Ontario.

In response to military families in crisis during this time, be it a need for emergency housing, counselling services, mental health support or food procurement, we created Operation Emergency Fund, offering supplementary financial support to families finding themselves in hardship due to the pandemic.

We're a young organization and proud to be part of a landscape that is composed of so many other notable foundations and charities working to support the military community. However, while other organizations' main efforts tend to focus more on the serving member or the veteran themselves, Together We Stand is proud to exist solely to honour and acknowledge Canadian military families. While our troops in uniform are away from home protecting our country and our way of life, it's their families who are often the forgotten glue that keeps everything together back here on the home front.

Stephanie, I'd like to turn it back over to you.

Ms. Stephanie Shapiro: Retired Lieutenant-General and former acting Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff Alain Parent, who serves on our honorary council, had this reflection to make: "One of the reasons that I had an outstanding career in the military is because of the support I got from my family. You cannot put service before yourself without the support of your family. The military family is the centre of gravity for the member."

But the support from families doesn't end when the military member retires and joins the veteran community. Today's veterans are numerous and their needs can be complex, requiring continued resiliency, sacrifices and steadfast support from their families. Before the expansion of the Soldiers' Aid Commission, 93% of our veterans currently residing in Ontario were ineligible for this support. We are so pleased that now everyone who has served in uniform, along with their families, is now able to access these funds, regardless of where and when they served.

It's important to note that military families are diverse in their composition, and thus, the supports that they require are diverse. The modernization of available supports recognizes that our veteran family community is full of individuals of varying circumstances, including service length, branch, geographical location, level of education and age. As such, I'm specifically enthused to see that this government has stepped up to offer supports for the reintegration of these serving members and their families

when they're discharged from the Canadian Armed Forces.

Reintegration is one of the most pressing challenges military families face. Addressing this challenge by the expansion of eligible expenses to include employment readiness supports, such as short-term courses or training, work tools and clothing for job interviews, is a great signal of the shift in this conversation.

Now, to close up, I'd like to pass this on to Rick.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I'm so sorry, but we are out of time. Thank you very much.

We will now move on to our second presenter, Darren Reid. Good afternoon. You have seven minutes, and you may begin by stating your name for the record.

Sergeant Darren Reid: Good afternoon. I'm Darren Reid. I work with a veteran well-being network. It's an online virtual Facebook group called the 31 Brigade Veteran Well-being Network. Across Canada, we've created, using reserve brigades, these veteran well-being networks in order to safeguard our veterans.

I think with the Soldiers' Aid Commission—I am really pleased with the inclusion of all the modern veterans. I still serve as a sergeant myself in the Canadian Armed Forces. But in that definition of “veteran,” there's no inclusion of the serving member via VAC definition. With the differences in services, specifically in reserve forces, a Class A soldier doesn't have the benefits that somebody working full-time for the Canadian Armed Forces has, whether they be reg force or on a full-time contract.

The other thing that we forget about with these people is, whether they're a student or they have their own business or they work a full-time job, they give up their life to serve, and they do it well. The problem that they have, though, is if they get sick or something happens outside of the normal VAC and CAF funding models, they have no fallback unless they go to a Legion or VETS Canada. Sometimes even with the Legion, given the COVID environment like we're in now, the Legion won't pay a tax bill or they won't help with a credit card payment because the spouse has been laid off, ongoing medication or stuff like that.

1500

The \$2,000 earmark that's set in the Soldiers' Aid Commission is not at all in line with what the times would dictate somebody falling on a hard time would have to experience. Mortgage and utility bills alone every month are usually more than \$2,000. If you had a house flood, you're probably looking at \$50,000 or \$60,000. Maybe the cap doesn't have to be raised, really, but maybe a ministerial override on that amount would be good.

Again, like the last group just spoke about, the family inclusion is huge, not just for the well-being of the veteran but mental health on the whole, especially if they have no way to come back to do what needs to be done to help the rest of their family out while they're deployed.

I really don't have seven minutes. That's all I had to say. I appreciate being able to speak today.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much.

Our last presenter in the 3 p.m. round is retired Major Mark Bossi. Welcome. You have seven minutes, and you may begin by stating your name for the record.

Major Mark Bossi: Good afternoon. For the record, my name is Mark Bossi. I'd like to thank you for inviting me to speak today.

I think it's fantastic that the Soldiers' Aid Commission was started in 1915. Even before World War I had finished, they recognized that soldiers were coming home broken in body and in mind, and Ontario stepped forward and started to take care of its soldiers.

This is important today, as Darren just said a second ago, when we talk about modern veterans, veterans of current conflicts. After World War I and World War II, there were thousands of soldiers coming home. During the Second World War, one in seven Canadians was in uniform. Today, how many are there? It's hard to see them. Just to prove a point, instead of wearing a Legion blazer and tie, like you might expect, I threw on some camouflage, okay? You can't see the veterans. They're invisible out there.

If I may, I think the most important thing I could ask you to consider is the veterans who are falling through the cracks. Right now, there are homeless veterans who don't have access to Internet. They couldn't appear before you today. At the same time, Darren mentioned something very important. We talk about what we can do to help various veterans: for the homeless veterans, Internet access so they can communicate with family, apply for government help and things like that.

At the same time, something really small, but something to consider: If Ontario is looking at what we can do to help veterans that nobody else can do, I'll just throw one out to you. Who pays for dental bills for a homeless veteran? Think about it. By the same token, what can we do that continues things that are helpful?

I can't thank Ontario enough for doing this, in addition to Veterans Affairs, in addition to the local community, in addition to the Royal Canadian Legion. And a small point: When I mention the Royal Canadian Legion, I don't speak for them. Previously, I worked with their Operational Stress Injury Special Section, and presently I'm working with a new organization called the Ontario Special Service Support Group. It's a very small group doing special services, special support.

The point I'd make is, there are all these organizations out here. Everybody's scrambling for the donation dollar and so on, but Ontario can make a difference for a veteran who's falling through the cracks, and that's significant—so just the fact that this committee exists.

The reason I mention the Royal Canadian Legion: If you think of the Royal Canadian Navy, the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Royal Canadian Artillery, the Royal Canadian Dragoons, the Royal Canadian Regiment, the Royal Regiment of Canada, there's a theme here. What I'd caution you on is and please ask you to consider is that stealing valour is very, very dangerous. The minute someone poses as a veteran and they say that they're with the “royal bugtessel fusiliers”—they don't exist. And if they

take money, it's the same thing as if somebody's stealing money from a food bank, which should be going to a family that needs it.

I'd ask you to keep in mind including some veterans in your commission's work, who can help make sure that the veterans who need the help are getting that help.

I'm sorry, I'm going to say it one last time: Please help the veterans falling through the cracks, okay? They're the ones who need your help more than anybody else. And I think, in effect, that's what the Soldiers' Aid Commission existed for in 1915. They were coming home broken. They needed help right then and there. Toronto built a convalescent hospital which exists today as a nursing home that's not military. At the same time, this commission is still in existence, so Ontario has stuck by it. I'm glad that the ministry, the CCSS, is helping to take care of this, because we need a champion and a sponsor. So good luck to the commission in the future.

Thank you very, very much for allowing us this opportunity to speak today. I'll stop boring you. Hopefully, there will be some good questions—not for me; you ask Darren. Pick on him, not me. Sorry; I was just kidding.

Thanks.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much.

We will begin our rounds of questioning this afternoon with the official opposition. MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank Sergeant Reid and Major Bossi for your service to our country.

Also, thank you to Stephanie for sharing the story of your family.

We are happy to look to Bill 202 to modernize the Soldiers' Aid Commission. We've heard from other deputants that typical applications to Veterans Affairs Canada take, on average, 14 months for assistance for veterans. Are you hoping, with the modernization of the Soldiers' Aid Commission, that this would speed up funding? I'd like to put this question to Sergeant Reid.

Sergeant Darren Reid: I understand what the Soldiers' Aid Commission is here for, but the real problem we have now with Veterans Affairs Canada is the lump sum payment, as opposed to a war veterans pension that they had at the end of World War II. A modern vet can get \$385,000 this year in a 100% lump sum. They could blow it all on a house then lose it all in two years' time and, like Mark said, end up homeless. So giving \$2,000 to try to get somebody off the street into a start-up kit, into a secure home environment—\$2,000 doesn't go far. When the Soldiers' Aid Commission was set at \$500, the cost of a home was \$40,000—so the \$2,000 compared to \$500,000 or even more to buy a house today. That's why I said maybe increasing it is a better way to go.

Mark and I have both been stakeholders with VAC for a long time. They need to fix VAC itself. It's not something the province of Ontario can sort out. Our federal job should be looked after by the federal economy—and our own benefits that way.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: So you'd very much like to see an increase to the \$2,000 amount.

A number of veterans struggle with various problems and, as you say, with homelessness. Many access different provincial services such as Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program.

Would you like to see reflected in this legislation a prohibition for any clawbacks for veterans receiving Soldiers' Aid Commission funding—from getting that money clawed back from ODSP and Ontario Works?

Sergeant Darren Reid: Yes. Again, whatever the province will do—like Mark said, thank you so much. But if that person is in dire straits—who knows? I have so many friends now who have lost legs, minds, bodies, arms—from not just Afghanistan, but a lot of other tours. I've served since 1989. Let's face it, the mental health so much isn't always PTSD from combat; it's moral injuries from repeated tours to a lot of different places that were a lot worse [*inaudible*] than we've seen with COVID-19. And like Mark said, it's not just a clawback from Ontario Works—when they're down on their luck, who pays for their dental, who covers the costs of these meds in Ontario for these people? Again, I'm going to go back to that poor part-time reservist where there are no benefits unless they're signed in on the clock with the military. Who pays for those? That's the kind of stuff we're hoping to see in the modernization of the commission.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Absolutely. It makes a great deal of sense.

I'd like to also thank Stephanie and Rick for your presentation and for your work distributing packages to veterans. I know that my colleague the MPP for St. Catharines's son served in the navy, and I think your mention of the Military Family Appreciation Day is also important.

1510

Was there anything that you would like to add, Rick, that you didn't get a chance to say during your presentation?

Mr. Rick Seymour: Thank you, and I'd also like to extend my gratitude to Sergeant Reid and Major Bossi for their service. That's a great question. Thank you for that and the opportunity to speak on the last little bit of the presentation.

What I'd like to offer is just that the inclusion of military families, whether that's active or veteran, in this revamped program really signals that this government understands the contributions that families make to our communities, and it demonstrates the importance of the family as part of that armed forces journey. I believe it was Sergeant Reid who highlighted that in some of his earlier statements.

To ensure that we're continuously taking care of those who have taken care of us I think is extremely important. We're really excited to be able to have a small part in that, to shed a light on this incredible group of Ontarians and Canadians who sacrifice so much for us in silence and rarely ask for anything in return. So this program, the expansion and modernization of the Soldiers' Aid Commission, is fantastic, and really, we're here to support it in any way we can.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Most definitely. I think it's also important that we look towards the timeliness of it. As has been said in the past, it is a fund of last resort after Veterans Affairs Canada is finished and those funds have finished. However, we know that that can be such a tremendous length of time. We want to make sure that the folks get assistance when and where they need it, not waiting over a year.

How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): One and a half minutes.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Okay. Also, to Major Bossi: You noted the valuation is currently a one-time \$2,000 amount. What would your suggestion be for the amount that the Soldiers' Aid Commission should administer to veterans?

Major Mark Bossi: Honestly, I wouldn't put a dollar value on it. I'd suggest that somebody could look at this from a statistical viewpoint, give some consideration to other benefits available from various levels of government and bring it into the 21st century.

Very quickly, I'll just mention something. This comes from tax dollars from all citizens of Ontario, so it's a non-partisan support for the military, and even this committee—I really respect the fact that this is not one party; all the political parties are coming together to help the soldiers. Just like you supported us when we were overseas—you paid for my ammunition and my pyjamas and you fed me—now that we're back, there are a few soldiers that need your help.

I'm really sorry, I couldn't even guess. I'd let somebody else sit down and look at it and think about what's reasonable. Do you know what? If you look at individual cases, maybe it's a sliding scale. Maybe a veteran, a double amputee, needs a little bit of a different amount than somebody like me. I'm sorry, I have a long answer, but I would just say, somebody else can figure that one out.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: That's quite all right, Major. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): We will now move on to the government. We have MPP Babikian to lead this round.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you to all presenters, and thank you to Darren and Mark for your service and Stephanie and Rick for your organization to stand by our families. They are equally important.

But before I continue my question, I would love to ask Rick to finish his closing remarks, for which he was cut short. Rick, if you want to finish your thoughts?

Mr. Rick Seymour: Thank you, I appreciate that. I summarized it a little bit in my previous opportunity to speak from the question posed to me earlier, but it's really about how we're excited to shed light on the incredibly diverse group of Ontarians who sacrifice so much for us in silence. That's military families. That's inclusive of that veteran.

But for every veteran that there is across this province, and we know there are about 200,000 of them since World

War II, there is a mom or a dad or a brother or sister or a son or a daughter, a husband or a wife that is equally part of that journey. They just don't wear the uniform. But when that troop comes home and reintegrates, that family is their unit now, moving forward. They are that immediate support. I think we owe it to these families to provide them with the resources and support that they need as well to help set not only their veteran family member up for success, but the family up for success as well.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Now, I know the families are the forgotten group or side in this whole debate, but can you elaborate a little bit more—either you, Rick, or Stephanie—what type of assistance families, spouses, children need to overcome those difficult times?

Mr. Rick Seymour: Sure, I'd be happy to provide a couple of anecdotal situations that we've encountered. Emergency housing is one of them. Many military families, whether active or veteran, have moved quite a bit once they've been posted. That's across the country, so where your family is currently does not necessarily mean where your extended family is from or those around you.

So there was a situation where, in the middle of the night, a military family lost their house due to a fire, and they had nowhere to go. Certain funding wasn't available to them on an emergency basis, so we were able to quickly put together \$1,000 to cover three nights' hotel for a family of four to go and stay while they were able to deal with some other issues that were coming up and be taken care of more long-term. But we were able to make that happen within a 48-hour period of time.

We talk about child support as another one. A lot of military families can be single parents. I'm not sure of the exact statistics, but you could check with Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services to obtain the amount of single parents who are part of the military and veteran community. So when they're trying to go about their job or make a living, how their children are taken care of if they don't have that family support around them in the immediate area—those are two issues.

We talk about members who come back with either physical or mental injuries, access to supports or services for them to make sure that they can properly reintegrate into the community. Whether it's leaving their home, coming back into their home or just being an active part of the community, these are the types of things that not only the veterans need, but their families need, because, again, that troop is part of that family. When they come home, that mom or dad, or that brother or sister, that son or daughter, they're left in that immediate vicinity of that veteran.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Thank you.

Darren, I wanted to ask you a question. In your remarks, you mentioned something about ministerial override. Can you elaborate a little bit more on this issue and what you mean?

Sergeant Darren Reid: Yes. So the way the soldiers' aid is set up now is it's a once-in-your-lifetime op, and that's it. With that inclusion, if a veteran or the family

member, if you include them, has more than one emergency in their lifetime—and then let's face it, lightning does strike more than once, especially if you're down on your luck. If you keep it capped, maybe in a case-by-case scenario, a minister—whatever ministry name it has at the time—can give an override so that somebody can get into the fund more than once.

You were asking about the family, and Rick hit on it, but with veterans later on in life, Veterans Affairs pays for priority access beds for veterans. But a lot of time when they're elderly, the spouse does not get that community access bed, and a lot of times, sometimes the spouse is in worse health than the veteran is when they're looking to move from their own private home to long-term care in the province as well.

I also serve as a Legion services officer, and like Mark, I'm a national vice-president of the operations special section in the Legion, but I'm not speaking for the Legion today.

Does that help answer your question, sir?

Mr. Aris Babikian: Yes. Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Two minutes.

Mr. Aris Babikian: I just wanted to ask a quick question of whoever wants to answer. I wanted to find out from you more about the soldiers, the veterans who are participating in peacekeeping missions around the world and how that peacekeeping mission—when they come back, does it affect them as the active duty soldiers or veterans?

Sergeant Darren Reid: Absolutely, sir. Can you imagine being somewhere where you have rules of engagement, where you're watching young children being raped or whatever, and you have to wear that moral injury that you can't engage because your rules of engagement say that you can't interfere with whatever way the normal lifestyle is? As Canadians, we take our values abroad, but we're not allowed to actually enforce them. We have to stay with the pattern of life for the local community.

If you think of peacekeeping as anything else—think of it as a hockey game and trying to be the ref in a hockey game, knowing that you have to be a player in the game too, just the same as if you were doing combat.

Major Mark Bossi: I'm forced to choose my words very carefully in adding to Darren's points, but Mr. Seymour raised the point about the military family that makes me think of this.

Before my retirement, I investigated a number of soldier suicides. I remember with one suicide reading very vivid accounts of what this soldier had seen in Haiti on a humanitarian mission. It was very sad. His family—I'm tying two points together. Sadly, the young soldier committed suicide, and his family asked for the simplest thing, and I was so glad that their community was able to honour them. When Remembrance Day was approaching, they asked, could the grave of their son have a small cross on it and a poppy, like all the other veterans? And the local Legion was fantastic. Without hesitation—just verbally, they made sure that the family's wish was honoured. It was

so nice to see how the family was taken care of when they'd actually lost their son. Again, it just shows what we can all do to help the family and the soldiers themselves.

So I want to thank Mr. Seymour for reminding me, and I thank you for the question about whether soldiers on peacekeeping missions suffer—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much. Thank you. That concludes the time we have.

Since the independent member does not have questions at this time, we will go back to the official opposition. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you, Chair. At this time, I would also like to thank Sergeant Reid and Major Bossi for your service to this country. It is very much appreciated.

I would like to direct my question to Sergeant Reid. You mentioned in your presentation that you would like to see serving veterans—veterans that are still serving in our military, in our services—included. Would you like us to maybe include that in an amendment? Can you elaborate on what you feel the definition of a veteran should be within this bill?

Sergeant Darren Reid: The Royal Canadian Legion's model is a veteran is a veteran is a veteran. It's somebody who has served and been honourably released. If they're still serving, they're still doing the honourable job. They just haven't had that release part of it yet. From the time that person joins until death, that oath never goes away. We don't just turn it back in with our uniform.

Again, back to the reserve force, if a Class A soldier, a part-time reservist isn't signed in, DND and VAC have no coverage for that person for anything.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great.

Interjection.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Sorry, go ahead.

Sergeant Darren Reid: That's the inclusion we would like to see, because they are modern veterans. Even though they're part-time soldiers, they could still have three, four, five tours under their belt, too.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Correct. Okay, thank you.

Once again, I would just like to know—you explored the avenue of ministerial override that you also mentioned for the other member, the government member. Ministerial override: You wanted to make sure what was included in this bill is the once-in-a-lifetime. You mentioned that it's a once-in-a-lifetime deal. Would you like to see that as an amendment in this bill?

Sergeant Darren Reid: Yes, ma'am, or just taking the once-in-a-lifetime piece out of it would be so much simpler. It would save a lot of staff work. If it's vetted by VAC or the Royal Canadian Legion or whatever non-partisan group is doing the applications for you—I mean, if that person is really hard-struck up against the wall and needs help, why can't we help them?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: That's right. Okay, that's great. Thank you very much for that.

I just want to go back to the Together We Stand foundation. I appreciate what they do for our community. It's

so wonderful that you are continuing what your family has done in tradition. Your story is one that is compelling.

Can you go into the reasons that you are finding individuals requiring help through your organization and highlight the difference your work makes when they do receive your help? That would go to Rick.

Mr. Rick Seymour: I'd just like to note I love the sign right above your head. It's very pointed to our conversation today.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: It's actually a military boy up there.

Mr. Rick Seymour: Well, thank him for his service.

The first time that I had the opportunity to go to a base and meet with military families was in Edmonton two years ago, at CFB Edmonton. My dad is from New Brunswick, and being born and raised in the Toronto area but having a lot of east coast roots and then going out west—we know that geographically, obviously, our country differs, but, from a Canadian standpoint, that service to the military does not change no matter where you're located or where you were born. So when I was first on base at CFB Edmonton and had an opportunity to sit down with families and talk with the spouses and the kids and the moms of the men and women of our uniform and was being hugged by complete strangers thanking me for what we're doing—it was this ultra-Canadian standoff where they're thanking me, I'm thanking them and it goes back and forth. The first woman who did that, Jane, said to me, "Mr. Seymour"—I said, "Please, call me Rick; Mr. Seymour is my dad"—"I just want to thank you for seeing me and hearing me. It's the first time I've ever felt acknowledged." It almost broke my heart, because it's not a sympathetic play by any stretch of the imagination. As my colleague Stephanie said, military families are extremely resilient and strong and proud—but more that, for the first time, she felt that she was part of that journey and part of the fact that it was her person who was down range in harm's way but somebody else saw her for her sacrifices that she made as a mom.

That is just one of many stories that I've been fortunate to have in terms of my few years being involved with this foundation and travelling the country meeting with active men and women and their families, veterans and their families, looking at that family dynamic—and realizing, again, whilst that troop is obviously thanked, I would argue that we don't do enough to thank our troops in this country. I would argue that as a civilian population we don't know enough about the troops in this country, and we should. If we don't know enough about the troops, then how do we dare say we know enough about their families who go through this; who move seven, eight, nine times throughout their life; who have to deal with the injured husband or wife or son or daughter who comes home? And some don't come home. We've seen that, unfortunately, twice this year, where we lost men and women of our armed forces. Those families live with that for the rest of their lives.

It's our obligation as Ontarians to make sure that those families have all the support services they need. And as

we've heard from Sergeant Reid and Major Bossi, at times it's not about restriction, it's not about political affiliations; it's just the right thing to do. We see that all the time with some of the work we've been able to do, and I'm very honoured and humbled to be able to be doing some of that.

I hope that answers your question, ma'am.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I'd like to direct my next question to Major Bossi. You mentioned homeless vets. We have a Legion member from Branch 350 in St. Catharines who has identified several homeless vets within St. Catharines. I'm sure I can speak for most of the committee members here—no vet should have to deal with poverty or homelessness in this country, and I strongly say that. It is important that we consider having a goal in our legislation to eradicate homelessness and poverty clearly, clearly, clearly stated and—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I'm so sorry, MPP Stevens; we are out of time.

Back to the government: MPP Roberts.

1530

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you so much to our presenters for your presentation and the great work and advocacy that each of you are doing. Of course, thank you to Rick and Stephanie for the great work of the Together We Stand team, and of course, to Major Bossi and Sergeant Reid, thank you for your service.

Just two points of clarification before I jump into some questions: We've been tossing around how often somebody would be eligible to apply for the Soldiers' Aid Commission support. I can confirm that you are eligible every 12 months. So it's not just once in a lifetime; it's once a year that you can apply. And then also, I just wanted to clarify as well that our commitment with these changes is that, if you are receiving Ontario Works or ODSP and apply for the Soldiers' Aid Commission support, you won't experience any clawbacks of those supports. That's another piece of this. I just want to make sure everyone is on the same page.

I've got questions for all of you, but I'll start with Rick and Stephanie. A big piece of ensuring that we can reach this new generation and new population of veterans that we'll be expanding this service to is increasing awareness and making sure that folks know about it. Before this change, 93% of veterans in Ontario and their families weren't eligible for this service, so that's a huge number that we're bringing into the program.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how your organization and others like you—our Legions; we heard earlier today from True Patriot Love; groups like that—how can you guys help us and work together with us to spread awareness on this program?

Mr. Rick Seymour: Thank you for the question, sir. I appreciate it. You've nailed it. The key crux of all of this is amplifying that awareness. When I had the opportunity to meet with General Vance earlier this year, that was the one thing that he really challenged us with—myself in particular—to suggest that the amplification of the awareness for our military not only helps bolster recruitment but leads to retention, and then obviously, the transition out as well is all a part of that journey.

We found that, obviously, in 2020, one of the silver linings is we're fortunate to have the technology that we do within our grasp to be able to connect coast to coast to coast, no matter what the time zone is, across all sorts of platforms. Obviously, as Major Bossi highlighted, if you don't have an Internet connection or may not have access to online platforms, that becomes a bit of a challenge. But I would certainly encourage not only this commission but ourselves to leverage social media and digital media platforms to work together on this, to not try to duplicate services but work together to help get that message out.

We work with families all across this country. We partner with the MFRCS. Being a private foundation and one that is endorsed by the Canadian Armed Forces community as an official philanthropic partner, we have the ability to work with MFRCS, to work independently with bases all across this country. It's really about connecting at a grassroots level and building it from the ground up. To do that, in this world, in COVID-19, embrace technology, create really good content and leverage partnerships to help disperse that message across. I hope that answers your question, sir.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: For sure, yes. It's got me thinking; my riding, actually, has the new department of defence headquarters in it, in Ottawa. So I'm thinking perhaps it would be worthwhile to connect with some of the folks there and make sure that veterans in Ontario are aware of this at the point of discharge, to know that this program exists and has existed and, as Major Bossi outlined, has a really distinguished history in Ontario. Thank you again for the work you're doing.

Major Bossi, I'll jump over to you. You talked about making sure that we catch those veterans who are falling through the cracks. I think you're right in indicating that this program really has historically served that function in catching those veterans who have a particular issue that isn't covered by a regular social services program or Veterans Affairs Canada supports or whatever it might be. Obviously, a part of these changes is expanding the eligibility of programs and services that veterans can access through the Soldiers' Aid Commission, namely adding in mental health supports and employment readiness.

I wondered if you might be able to comment a little bit on how important it is to expand that eligibility and make sure that we're providing those supports to some of our veterans who maybe have fallen through the cracks in accessing the right support that they need.

Major Mark Bossi: Thank you. Oddly enough, as I said, just for fun today I threw on an old camouflage shirt. Over here, there's a Velcro badge for a sentinel. Inside the army, the Sentinel Program was put together—you think of a sentry as looking outside, but a sentinel turns inside to make sure the camp isn't on fire. With regard to mental health, the sentinels are looking for soldiers, sailors, air crew who have mental health problems, difficulties, and we see that in the veteran community.

Darren and I have worked with the special section inside the Legion. Finding the veterans who are struggling—they don't necessarily want to talk to somebody in

a white laboratory coat or a doctor. Just as an example, I've got the Red Cross psychological first aid instructor course, I've got the Mental Health Commission of Canada mental health first aid course and Sentinel training, and when I was in the army, I took the mental fitness and suicide awareness training. I'm taking more courses now through Zoom and through TED Talks and such because, during COVID, people are suffering from COVID fatigue like combat fatigue.

Trying to answer your question a bit, the soldiers who are falling through the cracks might not necessarily be in the shadow of National Defence headquarters in Ottawa. They might be out in a small rural community. I'm just tossing a spitball: For example, ServiceOntario offices are all over the place. As long as an application form is available there, then if there's no Legion, if there's no Together We Stand representative, different things—it's making it as accessible as possible by various means. Social media? Sure, but at the same time, we always found that the ink blot method worked best, by word of mouth. If we were helping a branch of a Legion or a small community, the neighbouring branch would then ask, "Could you come over and help us? We've got a veteran who's holed up, and the police are afraid to go on his property." We had an engineer from Newfoundland talk to him on the Internet and the next thing you know, he came out and spoke to the local police and they gave him coffee and Timbits.

All that to say, it's a very graphic example of how all of us can help in different ways. In the big cities—

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): I'm so sorry, Major Bossi, but we are out of time.

MPP Karahalios, did you have questions?

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: I just want to say thank you, Sergeant Reid and Major Bossi, for your service. Rick and Stephanie, thank you for sharing the family perspective on things.

Major Bossi, since you got cut off, would you like to continue and finish off what you were saying?

Major Mark Bossi: Okay. Rick, I'm half joking, but for example—I'm just going to tease Rick because I know he can take it. In the city, shirt and tie, Rick can do that type of talking. Darren and I can go someplace where it's a bit more low-key. At the same time, there's all different types of help that are required. That's why these alliances are huge.

I'll steal the motto of another organization. It was, "Honour the fallen; helping the living." A really simple thing: I've got a poppy on my Ontario licence plate. I appreciate the fact that Ontario has those so the veterans can wear their poppy 365 days of the year.

All that to say, there are various ways of helping. People can use their imagination. They'll come to us with suggestions—Rick's organization, Darren and his work, where he does his thing, and the people I run into. We'll often be amazed at how people come up with innovative solutions and new ones, especially during COVID, like a Zoom committee hearing. Whoever heard of that before COVID?

Okay, I'll silence myself now.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: No, no, that's great. Thank you so much.

Rick, you said that we don't thank them enough; we don't know enough. That is absolutely correct. Having this bill come forward, having us speak about this and bringing it to light again is so important. Thank you for those comments.

Back to you, Major Bossi—I'm sorry, not to pick on you—you talked about dental care. That's something that came up earlier and it's something that I thought about as well. I know that seniors in general have difficulty accessing affordable dental care, and then you add on the added layer of someone who might be a veteran and homeless as well. Can you expand on your thoughts with regard to dental care?

Major Mark Bossi: Okay. You know that expression, "It's not about me"? But right now I've got seven teeth left. Even though I played hockey, I didn't lose any teeth from hockey; it came from somewhere else.

My benefactor is the University of Toronto dental faculty. They run their dental clinic and so they fixed me up. They took me on as a veteran who, quite literally, was between the cracks. They took care of me. While I was a serving member of the army reserve, I wasn't eligible for full dental coverage. I'm not whining. I'm explaining a problem that Darren identified and letting you know what it can be like.

Fast-forward: You've got a veteran of any age, perhaps homeless. He doesn't have a dental plan from an employer. This is where we can help people falling through the cracks.

I know the dental college has been doing some fantastic work pro bono, like the lawyers do, and they've been

helping seniors in general. So I think we can dovetail all of these different things together. If the Soldiers' Aid Commission can help a non-senior veteran who is down on his luck, and maybe a reservist—I don't care; you help the people who need the help is the polite way I ask everybody to think of it and then let them come up with the solution.

Yes, dental care is huge because—think about it. Has anybody in the room had a toothache and had that pain, or had an abscessed tooth? You can't sleep and you can't think. There is somebody out there like that right now. There you go. Maybe that's the way that the Soldiers' Aid Commission could help out for something that's falling through the cracks like that, just a thought, and then somebody else can give it some more detailed thought and analysis.

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Thank you so much.

The Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova): Thank you very much to all of our presenters for your very thoughtful presentations. I think I speak for all members that we have learned tremendously from today's public hearings.

To Major Bossi and Sergeant Reid, thank you so much for your service. And to MPP Stevens, thank you for your son's service. We, as Canadians and as Ontarians, certainly appreciate your sacrifice.

That concludes our business for today. As a reminder, the deadline to send in written submissions will be 7 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on October 22, 2020. The deadline for filing amendments to the bill will be at 5 p.m. on Friday, October 23, 2020.

The committee is now adjourned until 9 a.m. on October 26, 2020, for clause-by-clause consideration of Bill 202. Thank you very much.

The committee adjourned at 1543.

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