

QUESTION PERIOD

Veterans Affairs

Support Services for Veterans

Hon. Yonah Martin (Acting Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Government Leader in the Senate. It relates to the service delivery at Veterans Affairs Canada.

Thousands of veterans dealing with physical and mental illnesses continue to wait a very long time to begin treatment. An Order Paper answer recently tabled in the other place revealed that for the fiscal year 2017-18, over 3,000 veterans waited for more than a year to receive an answer from the department regarding their application for disability benefits.

I mentioned in a question earlier this month the service standard for Veterans Affairs to provide a response in 16 weeks, but the department meets the standard only 43 per cent of the time.

Senator, I expect your answer will point to the investments your government has already made. The backlog persists. Why hasn't service delivery improved at Veterans Affairs? Why do veterans still wait a year simply to get a response?

Hon. Peter Harder (Government Representative in the Senate): I thank the honourable senator for her question. I also thank her for her suggestion as to what my response might be.

Let me start there and speak to the investments that have been made. Perhaps I should go back a bit to speak about the disinvestments made by the last government. Now, I don't want to do that. I think it's fair to say the reopening of service centres that this government undertook was an important piece of increasing the capacity.

Honourable senators, I would also point out — and this is something we need to bear in mind — there has been a significant increase in applications because, frankly, our veterans who served us so honourably in Afghanistan are increasingly part of the intake of needs. There is an increase of 32 per cent in disability applications and a 60 per cent increase in the first applications for disability benefits.

The additional offices that have been reopened and the 470 new staff that have been put in place are important investments, honourable senators, let alone the \$42.8 million. However, it will take some time to have that system operate on the capacity that all of us would want to have because it is important that our women and men who have served us be treated appropriately in their veterans benefits.

Senator Martin: Senator, I should have said I expect you to talk about the investments made and to blame the previous government for the failings of your current government.

A veteran interviewed by the CBC on this matter stated he believes the backlog has been made worse by the requirement that Veterans Affairs conduct its own medical

assessments instead of relying on diagnosis by doctors at National Defence. The government has pledged to address exactly these types of gaps between the requirements of DND and Veterans Affairs.

Could the government leader please make inquiries and let us know what the government is doing to address this specific problem?

Senator Harder: The honourable senator has identified a very important problem, namely, the transition from Defence to Veterans Affairs, which was begun to be addressed by the last government when the Minister of Veterans Affairs became the Associate Minister of Defence, which was continued in this government to ensure the work that was under way at the bureaucratic level of a seamless transition was strengthened. That work continues. I would be happy to make inquiries and report back.