

Transcript of Press Conference/ Transcription de conférence de presse

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Subject/Sujet: Release of findings on mental health services provided to children of military personnel from CFB Petawawa/ Conclusion de l'enquête sur la prestation de services de santé mentale aux enfants des membres des Forces canadiennes de BFC Petawawa

Moderator: Hello and welcome to the National Press theatre. With us today, we have Mr. André Marin, the Ombudsman of Ontario who will talk to us about an investigation he has concluded into Petawawa. Il va d'abord parler en anglais et en français et nous avons à peu près une quarantaine de minutes. Monsieur Marin?

André Marin: Merci bien. Canada is currently at war in Afghanistan, the most serious armed conflict our country has seen in a very long time. During wars, collateral damage is inevitable. When we think of collateral damage, we tend to imagine the unintended physical harm that happens in the battlefield when explosives detonate and shots are fired, but war also does unintended harm on the home front. I'm referring to the emotional harm to the innocents and impressionable minds of those children who have a parent or parents serving in the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan.

These are children like the young girl we heard of during a recent investigation, who collapsed to the floor one day, simply because she was called to the principal's office. The girl had spent so many days surrounded by flags at half-mast and hearing about members of her community who had been killed or dismembered in the line of duty in Afghanistan, she was sure the principal was about to tell her that her father was dead.

She and others like her are suffering because of the war and they need help. I'm referring of course to the intense harm that the war is causing to those military children who are among — whose parents are among the fallen and to children who must adjust to stunning changes when their parents do return home. The stress of combat has left many of these fathers and mothers solemn and troubled. Their children are left to cope with families suddenly in disarray, sometimes even dysfunctional.

It is obvious that this kind of collateral damage cannot entirely be avoided. Stress and anxiety are among the costs of war and part of what comes with loving those who are put in harm's way. The province bears no responsibility for what cannot be prevented. What it does bear deep responsibility for though is its part in making things better. The intensity of the harm caused by war-related stress and anxiety can be reduced and managed with timely and effectively intervention by trained counselors. Many of those who are damaged can be helped if they receive professional support. Yet we in Ontario have been failing to provide the support that is required.

Bien sûr, on ne peut pas complètement éviter ce type de dommage collatéral. Le stress

et l'anxiété font partie des coûts de la guerre. C'est ce qui s'est produit quand on met en danger les gens qu'on aime. La province n'est pas du tout responsable de l'inévitable, mais elle est responsable d'une chose : faire sa part pour arranger la situation. On peut réduire la souffrance qui résulte du stress et de l'anxiété causés par la guerre en faisant intervenir au bon moment des conseillers en santé mentale. On peut aider la plupart des personnes qui souffrent en leur apportant un soutien professionnel, mais ici en Ontario, nous leur avons refusé le soutien attendu.

Particularly hard hit are the children of Canadian Force Base Petawawa. Since August 2006, 16 Petawawa-based soldiers have been killed during the mission and some 80 wounded, at least half of those experiencing severe permanent physical injury such as the loss of a limb. Between November and December — pardon me, between September and November 2006 — there were so many soldiers killed, flags at Petawawa flew at half mast for 49 days straight. Sadly today, they are flying again at half mast.

In September 2006, the Phoenix Centre, the only children's mental health centre serving residents of Renfrew County, which includes CFB Petawawa, asked the province for urgent funding to meet a tenfold increase in demand for the last 12 months; demand for psychological counselling in the wake of the Afghanistan deployment. It was turned down by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services of the province of Ontario.

So too were others who tried to come to its aid, including the local member of provincial parliament, the base commander and a non-governmental organization, Children's Mental Health Ontario. The Phoenix Centre warned publicly that the government of Ontario was failing to address the four-to-six-month wait time that troubled military children were forced to endure. The province cited among several reasons for denying the money its own chronic underfunding of children's mental health services all across the province. It suggested the centre seek federal help.

Meanwhile the federal government steadfastly refused to step into the breach, taking the position that the issue was one of provincial jurisdiction. The children of military families were now caught in the crossfire of a federal/provincial squabble. That is when I decided, on March 1st, 2007 to launch an investigation after receiving a complaint from the Phoenix Centre. It is absolutely undeniable, indisputable, that the provincial government is solely responsible for providing mental health services to children of members of the Canadian Forces in Petawawa. Accordingly, I have made three recommendations to the government of Ontario: That it immediately fund children's mental health services through the Phoenix Centre, that it ensure long-term mental health support for the children of military personnel in consultation with the federal government, and

- that it provide my office with monthly progress reports.

I'm pleased to announce today that the premier of Ontario has accepted all of the recommendations, but any analysis of who bears responsibility for the mental health of children in Petawawa would be incomplete without reference to the federal

government's role. While constitutionally, the province retains full responsibility for mental health services for Ontario children, regardless of their parents' occupation, the federal government has a moral obligation to support its troops.

In the last 12 months, the increased demand for mental services in Petawawa for children has been a direct result of Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan. This is an extra load, superimposed upon the already strained provincial government health services. If Canadian soldiers feel that their communities have abandoned them by failing to help them minimize the collateral damage that their service does to their children, it will affect their morale, their sense of being and esprit de corps, all of which are essential to peak combat capability.

To its credit, however, the federal government has recently provided a one-time funding allotment of \$100,000 that will ultimately be used to provide services to children on the base. This goodwill gesture should not be lost on the province. More will undoubtedly be needed in the future.

In addition, I'm happy to report that as a result of the investigation, both levels of government have shown a new sense of collaboration and enterprise in seeking long-term resolution that will put the interests of the children in Petawawa ahead of the narrowly defined technical arguments about whose role it is to respond to the cries of soldiers' children in need.

Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you very much. First on my list, I have (inaudible), CP.

Question: Mr. Marin, can you give us an idea of how many children in this backlog are involved?

André Marin: There are dozens of children involved, suffering from all types of casualties if I may use that word, from attention deficit, low self-esteem, difficulty interacting with other children, some even having suicidal tendencies. Without proper funding for mental health services for these children, they would be in the system four to six months and I understand from the latest data, it could be as long as a year.

You know, you have got to put this whole issue in perspective. I mean, we are talking here as if we quibbling about dividing the Rockefeller estate. We are talking about \$230,000 for the next year and possibly another similar amount for the year after that to hire four people. It seems to me that this is really a tempest in a teapot, considering the respective budgets of both governments.

Moderator: Next on my list, Lina Dibb, NTR.

Question: Oui, monsieur Marin, vous avez parlé tout à l'heure de la question morale du gouvernement fédéral. Vous avez été dans une autre vie aussi l'ombudsman pour les

forces Armées. Je voudrais vous entendre sur l'obligation morale du ministère de la défense et du gouvernement?

André Marin: Écoutez moi, en tant qu'ombudsman militaire, j'ai eu l'occasion de visiter plusieurs déploiements et d'aller dans les opérations. Je suis allé en Afghanistan même quelques — à quelques reprises et mon rôle en tant qu'ombudsman militaire, c'était de savoir quel était — quelles étaient les conditions de vie des soldats, est-ce qu'il y avait des questions qui les préoccupaient, est-ce qu'ils étaient bien nourris, bien traités, etc. et à maintes reprises, le thème que j'entendais des soldats, ce n'était pas « Je suis maltraité, j'ai des difficultés. » La question qu'on posait, c'était « Est-ce qu'on prend soin de ma famille au Canada? » et puis c'est pour ça qu'on peut pas isoler le traitement des enfants de l'impact sur le moral des troupes en opération. Et puis étant donné la somme aussi minimale, aussi petite pour venir remédier au problème ici, j'ai recommandé au gouvernement de l'Ontario d'immédiatement financer l'appui des services médicaux, pour l'appui de la situation mentale des enfants à Petawawa.

Question: Alors vous parlez de la somme très basse. Hier on nous annonçait des millions pour acheter des chars d'assaut. Je veux revenir — je sais que vous êtes, côté compétence, c'est au gouvernement ontarien, mais côté obligation morale, est-ce que c'est pas à Ottawa ou au ministère de la défense de donner ces quelques milliers de dollars pour les enfants de leurs soldats?

André Marin: OK, il y a deux façons de voir la situation: l'obligation juridique qui repose sans aucun doute sur la province, mais étant donné la situation extrême, la situation extraordinaire qui se présente ici à Petawawa, il y a quand même une obligation qui repose sur le gouvernement fédéral, écoutez, de s'asseoir à table puis dire, « Écoutez est-ce qu'on peut vous donner un coup de main ici? » et puis, c'est ce que j'ai incité les parties de faire.

Moderator: Richard Brennan, Toronto Star.

Question: I'm a bit confused as to why, you know, given it is a federal jurisdiction, why they aren't solely responsible?

André Marin: Because under the constitution, this is an area that falls under the provincial responsibility. The provincial government has the jurisdiction to deal with mental health services in Ontario for its citizens, including the children who are in Petawawa, that is why.

Moderator: Roger Smith, CTV.

Question: Mr. Marin, what does it say to you that it took public complaints by the Phoenix Centre and an inquiry by you to persuade Ontario and Ottawa to put more money into helping kids, a small amount of money, especially when Ottawa is spending millions on tanks?

André Marin: I'm told that the day the prime minister was briefed and made aware of the situation in Petawawa, his first impression, his first instinct was "Let's resolve this by 2:00 p.m. today." When I sat down with the premier on Wednesday, he said, "When I saw your findings, I said let's resolve this right now". So between the two heads of government, things fell off track. I think that the political underlings of the prime minister and the premier were raising the political rhetoric to the point where it was difficult to engage in discussion. The federal government I found to be quite reasonably disposed to speak to the province, but their phone never rang. The Minister of Children and Youth Services would say in the House, in interviews, in letters that she wrote, "Address your concerns to the federal government, it is their responsibility," but there was no effort by the Ministry to contact the federal government and say, "Can you guys cough up some cash?"

So the political rhetoric was elevated to the point where, you know, it reminded me of children involved in a squabble and you always hope that one of the most mature will stand up and say, "Can we all just be friends?" but nobody seemed to say that. Now I must say that I thought it was impressive that the federal government would, in all of this, step up with \$100,000. I mean, the whole cost for the next year is about \$230,000. Well, the federal government has contributed \$100,000 which is pretty good and the federal government was not immune either to political rhetoric. Some political advisors to the federal government were musing about, "Well, if that is the case, let's just move the base out of Petawawa and deprive Ontario of \$3 billion a year." The day we approached federal officials, political advisors on this issue, one said, "Well, today we are announcing a couple of billion dollars for transit. Why don't we just lop off a couple of hundred thousand and give it to the kids in Petawawa?"

So they were not immune to this kind of political debate, but you know, we should all put this in the "lessons learned" category. Now it is done, let's learn our lessons and let's move on and let's make sure that we think about the children's interests first and this is a story with a happy conclusion where both the premier, the prime minister and the minister of National Defence did the right thing.

Question: Well, in terms of lessons learned, obviously it seems the problem has been sorted out for Petawawa. Now I may be asking you a question that steps beyond your current mandate, but you do have experience with the military. Do you envision there are going to be similar problems in a place like Gagetown which again, an area which now has a lot more soldiers over in Afghanistan, more deaths and not as many social services around?

André Marin: Roger, I knew you were going to ask me that question, so I did look into it. What our investigators confirmed is that Petawawa is an exceptional situation. I can't say categorically that it may not happen in other bases, but Gagetown has Fredericton. The Edmonton base is close to Edmonton. You have city services that are there. So that is why we have not seen the same issue arise in other bases and let's not forget, 20 of the 52 deaths incurred by the Canadian Forces since the beginning of the conflict were incurred in Petawawa, 16 of those since the end of the summer. So you have got

an acute demand and you have got a base that is not as properly positioned close to cities as perhaps the ideal would be, so it's geographically at a disadvantage.

Moderator: And in the back row?

Question: (Inaudible), CBC Television. Mr. Marin, have you had other complaints regarding adult mental health problems and soldiers returning from Afghanistan or their spouses that are having trouble getting access to these services?

André Marin: That would be federal. So it is not something that I would necessarily be involved in. The focus of the investigation here was children of those deployed and whether or not they were getting the proper mental support from the province.

Question: And what specifically do you want the federal government to do or how would you like it to change its role, even if constitutionally it is not to intervene?

André Marin: I think the federal government has come around to recognizing that it wants to help and I think it deserves a lot of credit for that. I think the federal government needs to sit down with the provincial government and say, "What is the bill and how would you like us to contribute?" and I think there needs to be some good old fashioned negotiations to get this back on track and I think that is what has happened so far, as we are speaking today, but the situation could easily return back to its initial stage if we don't. We need to talk, it is that simple and I think the federal government is listening. I think the province needs to — the province is the one getting the bills, it needs to give a call and say, "How can we split this up?"

Moderator: Yvon Cloutier, Radio-Canada.

Question: C'est pas Yvon Cloutier.

Question: Stéphane Leclerc, mais de Radio-Canada.

Moderator: Je m'excuse.

Question: Monsieur Marin, juste, peut-être qu'il y a des choses que je connais pas très bien dans le partage des services qui doivent être donnés, mais jusqu'à un certain point, est-ce que ça fait pas du sens, du gros bon sens que l'armée s'occupe — que l'armée s'occupe des soldats lorsqu'ils ont des problèmes de santé mentale. Alors pourquoi ils s'occupent pas de leurs familles proches en même temps?

André Marin: Écoutez, notre situation constitutionnelle est pas toujours logique, je dois vous l'avouer, mais la situation juridique est très claire. Il y a aucun doute que c'est de compétence provinciale de fournir le financement pour la santé mentale des enfants des forces armées canadiennes. C'est pas la situation aux États-Unis par exemple, mais c'est notre situation constitutionnelle. Donc il y a deux façons de regarder la question, d'une façon strictement constitutionnelle et juridique et dans ce cas-là, c'est la

province qui a la responsabilité. Il y a l'élément moral que évidemment, c'est causé par une guerre qui a augmenté énormément la demande. Donc c'est pour ça qu'aujourd'hui, je dis écoutez, ça suffit pas de regarder la question de façon strictement juridique, il faut la regarder dans l'ensemble et dans l'ensemble, c'est un devoir partagé entre les deux niveaux de gouvernement.

Question: Et juste pour une précision, lorsque vous dites que le ministre, le premier ministre ontarien a accepté vos recommandations, il y a eu une annonce de financement la semaine dernière. Est-ce que c'est à ça que vous faites référence?

André Marin: Oui, l'annonce de financement a eu lieu quelques jours après que j'ai partagé les conclusions de l'enquête avec le gouvernement de l'Ontario. Il s'agit d'une infusion de 24 millions \$, dont 2 millions \$ vont se retrouver dans un fonds de contingentement pour pouvoir être utilisé dans des cas d'urgence et de cas exceptionnels comme dans le cas de Petawawa.

Moderator: Once again Richard Brennan, Toronto Star.

Question: So what you are saying is the Ontario government is finally wising up to making the announcement before you embarrass them I guess?

André Marin: Well, I will let you draw those conclusions but you know, I was frankly disappointed by the response and the entrenchment of the provincial government on this issue. You know, the provincial government's position was twofold: one is what makes these kids special? Right, every — the squeaky wheel can't get the grease, you know, our system is strained. That was the first point and you will have to wait like everybody else. The second point was you know — I'm using the argument today that the casualties of war and there is and it is an extreme discreet example, therefore the province should not treat them like anybody else, but they were using the argument to advance their case, "Well, if it is the war, then it is not us" and I think you shouldn't be — you shouldn't be distinguished the occupation of the parents to decide who gets mental health services for children in Ontario. So those are the two arguments from the province and they held steadfast to those positions until the premier stepped in.

Question: You are convinced the money is there, right? I mean this isn't just a promise that hasn't been fulfilled?

André Marin: No, days after our report was filed, my findings were communicated to the provincial government. They announced a \$24-million pot of money of which \$2 million is a contingency fund to be used in extreme situations of urgency and the ministry of Children and Youth Services in Ontario sat down this week at my request with federal officials and — not with federal officials, rather but with the Phoenix Centre to start negotiating the amounts of money required in order to start providing those services now.

Moderator: Roger Smith, CTV.

Question: Mr. Marin, you know, you are saying the problem has been sorted out, but can you just step back and talk to us a bit about the human cost of all this, the fact that these kids are suffering so much and you know, how does it affect the morale of their parents, the soldiers that their kids are so upset and need help because of their deployments in Afghanistan?

André Marin: Well, when you are thinking that kids are on the brink of committing suicide, it is pretty serious stuff. The reason we are proceeding today, we are proceeding as if this is a case of emergency. We didn't finalize our report because I didn't want to be fiddling with prose while a child is on the verge of committing suicide in Petawawa. I understand that when some children, as I indicated, are called to the principal's office, they think it is to announce that one of their parents is dead. We have heard other anecdotal accounts that in some houses, they shut the blinds and stay in, not wanting to indicate that they are home in case someone wants to come over and notify that the next of kin has died. I mean this is serious stuff on the family.

And of course, on the soldiers in operation, when I was military ombudsman, I went to Afghanistan several times. I went to Bosnia and other operations and my job was to check on the welfare of soldiers and what I always found when I got there was they were more interested in asking me about people taking care of their families back in Canada. So there is a direct impact on combat capability. If you are out in the field and you are worried about your child committing suicide, how are you going to be focused on your mission?

So that is why I say that strictly legally, there is maybe no constitutional obligation on the federal government to do anything about it, but certainly morally, there is a very strong argument and I was pleased to see that the federal government acknowledged that and did this goodwill gesture. I was extremely happy to see that.

Moderator: Alex Drobot, Globe and Mail.

Question: Does it mean that the \$500,000 over two years have been delivered and if not, was there a timeline of when the money will be delivered?

André Marin: The money is supposed to start flowing ASAP. I was told that it is a question of the ministry checking the figures of the Phoenix Centre. I'm told right now the amount is somewhere around \$230,000. The federal government has contributed \$100,000 to the process. The province will deliver the difference and then there is next year to discuss. I mean we are not saying, you should have to drop bags of money. We are saying if there is a demand, you have to meet it and the Ministry is meeting the demand and we will be there to keep an eye on them, making sure they live up to their commitment. But right now, as I understand it, money should be flowing into the Phoenix Centre.

Question: Could you maybe comment on the fact that Canadian soldiers, while their

health care costs are provided for by the federal government, they are also contributing into the provincial health care program for their families and for their kids, for instance, and isn't there a double irony in the fact that while they are contributing to it, they are not getting the benefits?

André Marin: It is a complaint that I have heard many many times and it is something that we may be examining in the future. It is not something we have examined here, so I will not comment on it right now.

Moderator: Lina Dibb, NTR.

Question: Oui, monsieur Marin, j'aimerais que vous reveniez encore un peu sur ce que vous avez vécu comme expérience auprès de ces enfants-là et sur l'hypocrisie, pas d'un gouvernement ou d'un autre, mais de la société qui arrête pas de souligner le sacrifice et pendant qu'on fait tout ce flafle et tout ce bruit autour de ces sacrifices, on laisse des enfants dans...

André Marin: Il y a pas de doute, c'est un point qui est très important et puis, si on regarde le coût justement de l'initiative, on parle de peut-être 400,000, 450,000 dollars répartis sur une période de deux ans. Donc c'est pas un montant qui est énorme. C'est un montant qui est très facile à gérer je crois avec les budgets énormes que les deux gouvernements ont et puis, c'est une situation qui est déplorable puis peut-être que c'est parce qu'il y a moins d'attention. On paie moins d'attention, on donne moins d'attention à ce qui se passe sur les bases qui affectent les enfants. Il y a peut-être moins de gloire là, c'est moins excitant, c'est moins visuel, c'est moins évident peut-être pour le citoyen ordinaire – mais pour ceux qui sont dans les forces canadiennes, c'est un problème qui est réel, qui est important et on est en situation de crise à Petawawa présentement.

Moderator: And I think that is it.

André Marin: Merci à tous.