

Veterans press MPs for proper health care



By Brock Weir

Being the spouse or a family member of a man or woman serving in the Canadian Armed Forces can be a challenging life, but all too often, however, the biggest challenges start when the service person comes marching home.

And when they get home, the support they need is just not there.

That was the message delivered to Leona Alleslev, Member of Parliament for Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill, and other area politicians as they hosted a community consultation on the future of the Department of National Defence and how Canada treats its veterans.

Decades after leaving the military, Bob Sparling is still living with the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the fallout of several years in active service that went undiagnosed for over 20 years after leaving military life.

The community consultation was held at the headquarters for the Region of York in Newmarket, a location which holds particular poignancy for Mr. Sparling. It was within those rounded walls performing as a new member of the York Regional Police Male Chorus that a fellow choir member approached him.

'He said, 'You're him.' Mr. Sparling recalled to the panel. 'The next thing I know he is firing a whole round of questions. Then he hauls me out of the building completely away from the rest of the choir and says, 'You realise you have the classic symptoms.' I said, 'The classic symptoms of what?' and he says, 'PTSD.'

He didn't know what it was until the chorister explained it to him and the pieces began falling into place.

'I have terrific anger management problems. I have loss of memory. I have nightmares to the point where I could not sleep in the same bed as my wife because I would wake up and end up throwing her against the wall quite literally. Sometimes being the wife and family of a military man can be very, very difficult and a lot of it goes unrecognized ? very much so.'

Last Thursday's community consultation was one of a series being held across the country on behalf of the Department of National Defence and was co-hosted by Ms. Alleslev, Richmond Hill MP Majid Jowhari, and independent Senator Don Meredith, who was ousted from the Conservative caucus by then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2015. It was also attended by Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson and MPP Chris Ballard.

The purpose of the meeting was to hear from Canadians and understand the priorities citizens have for their armed forces. A number of questions were posed to the audience ranging from security issues facing Canadians that need to be addressed, Regions that need further support, the domestic role of the Canadian Armed Forces, and recognizing the services of veterans.

While residents came forward with suggestions of improved military presence in Canada's north as well as arguments that Canada should stay out of international skirmishes, the veterans in attendance placed the most poignant focus on the questions of how the Department of National Defence can support the health and wellness of its servicemen and women and the wellbeing of veterans.

Many said Canada's service personnel ? serving and retired ? should continue to receive the attention of military doctors.

?I have only recently discovered my injuries and I kind of go by Captain Van Winkle now because after 20 years I have learned I have amnesia and all kinds of serious things,? said Captain Phil Brooks. ?There is about 13 months of my life I don't remember right. As the dust came off?it was really made apparent because when we walk into a [civilian] doctor's office and you say I am hurt or suffering, I don't think they have the right perspective. If an operator comes in from the field and says they're hurt, usually there is a bleeding stump left and that's it. They don't understand that a civilian would probably be a lot louder, so there is probably a mismatch there.?

A man identifying as Pierre from Stouffville also took to the podium to address comments made by Mr. Sparling.

?I appreciate this gentleman who is still with his wife,? he said. ?It cost me mine and it cost me a lot. It took a long time for me to get to a point where I feel balanced, but I would like to see it addressed for all the young men who are coming back now because I know what they are going through.?

As a woman who served in the Royal Canadian Air Force herself, and as the daughter and granddaughter of those who served, the message was not lost on Ms. Alleslev, who said it is ?important not to lose sight of just how common it is and how we may not fully appreciate just how difficult it is on families.?

?With all these veterans I am almost at a loss for words,? she said. ?I would like to thank all of you for being here. This is a very important topic. To give of your time, to be engaged, and to be passionate enough to participate is a credit to each and every one of you and I am sure that you are not only here on your own behalf, but you also represent many others with whom you have had conversations on this topic and you are bringing their voices up.?