

INUIT TAPIIRIT KANATAMI

Submission to the Standing Committee on Veteran's Affairs

ITK welcome's the first study by the Veterans' Affairs committee on the situation of Indigenous Veteran's. We would like to take this opportunity to commend the work of the Canadian Rangers and Inuit veterans more generally, including Inuit former members of the RCMP.

Inuit like to say "First Canadians and Canadians First". Inuit have supported Canadian and Inuit sovereignty across Inuit Nunangat for decades, often at high cost for Inuit. In some cases, Inuit were relocated by the government of Canada, in an effort to establish and maintain a Canadian presence in the Canadian High Arctic. Redress and apology for those relocations, as well as addressing the intergenerational trauma and harms they perpetuate, is an essential component of reconciliation between Inuit and the Crown.

Despite the treatment that Inuit have received from the Canadian state, many Inuit have served proudly in the Canadian Forces. The record of service for Inuit traces back several decades, for example through Jack Shiwak, a renowned World War I sniper from Rigolet. Inuit have not hesitated to support Canadian sovereignty, whether by supporting Canada overseas, or supporting Canadian and Inuit sovereignty in Inuit Nunangat.

ITK also recognizes the service of Inuit RCMP members, particularly those serving in 'V' division, as well as those serving across Inuit Nunangat. Communities within Inuit Nunangat experience extremely high levels of crime and particularly violent crime. In some cases, Veteran's Affairs is the service provider for former members. As retired RCMP members, Inuit may be eligible to access services through Veteran's Affairs Canada. Many of the issues, particularly those related to access to mental health services, apply equally to former members currently living in Inuit Nunangat.

Providing public safety and public security across Inuit Nunangat is especially challenging. The reasons for this are the extremely vast amount of territory, the harsh climate and the remoteness of the entire region. Canada has adopted a strategy for maintaining its strategy which relies on that remoteness by employing the assistance of Inuit, through service in the Canadian Rangers. Canadian Rangers overcome many of the operational challenges of operating in remote environments by employing people who call those environments their homes.

"Remoteness" presents several more perplexing challenges unique to the provision of benefits during and after service. For example, although many Rangers live and serve in their own communities, those communities themselves are very removed from many of the realities, and indeed, many of the essential services which other Canadians take for granted. This kind of remoteness substantially hinders the accessibility of benefits and services for Veterans across Inuit Nunangat, as opposed to other Veterans.

When services are denied on a consistent basis, due to apparently neutral factors, such as remoteness, Canada should adopt special measures to ensure equitable opportunities. This is more so for Veterans, and particularly for Inuit Veterans.

The Rangers program depends upon individuals who have considerable on the land skills and traditional knowledge. These very same attributes may hinder accessibility, particularly if accessibility requires office-based skills (such as internet research, understanding program criteria and regulations, etc). It is reasonable to assume many Rangers only speak English as a second language.

Being a Canadian Ranger is itself a dangerous endeavor. Between 2011 and 2015, 49 Canadian Rangers died, more non-combat fatalities than experienced by the Canadian Forces during 10 years in Afghanistan.¹ The same social determinants of health which contribute to income inequality and depressed conditions for Inuit health and well-being across Inuit Nunangat are likely contributors to the extremely high fatality rate experienced by Canadian Rangers.

A 2015 report by the Canadian Forces Ombudsman concluded that “Accessibility to mental health services was found to be a concern, because mental health service providers might not understand the context within which the Canadian Rangers work and live. Canadian Rangers can be exposed to traumatic situations, so access to mental health services is critical.”²

There are two key barriers to mental health services for Canadian Rangers: lack of awareness regarding the availability of benefits³ and the absence of social infrastructure to provide those services.⁴ As the Ombudsperson’s report states, documenting work related injuries is already a substantial barrier to accessing services. In the event that an evaluation from a doctor is required to access service, the inability to access a doctor to secure a referral is itself a barrier to accessibility.

ITK fully supports the recommendations of the Canadian Forces Ombudsmen directed towards enhancing outreach to former RCMP members and Veterans regarding the availability of benefits, as well as how to secure those benefits. The Standing Committee should recommend that the government of Canada adopt special measures to enhance awareness of the availability of benefits and should further recommend special measures and supports to assist Veterans to secure those benefits.

¹ CBC News, “49 Canadian Rangers have died since 2011”, (April 20, 2015) online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/49-canadian-rangers-have-died-since-january-2011-1.3041246>. For comparison, for the period 2002 to 2012, the total number of Canadian soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan was 138 and the number of deaths classified as ‘not killed in action’ over the same ten year period was 20. See National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, Archived – Canadian Forces’ Casualty Statistics (Afghanistan) (June 10, 2013), online: <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=canadian-forces-casualty-statistics-afghanistan/hie8w9c9>. This implies that over a recent four year period, Canadian Rangers experienced over two times the amount of non-combat fatalities as all Canadian Forces in Afghanistan over a ten year period.

² National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman, Canadian Rangers A Systematic Investigation of the Factors that Impact Entitlements and Related Benefits of the Rangers, Nov 30, 2017, online: http://www.ombudsman.forces.gc.ca/assets/OMBUDSMAN_Internet/docs/en/rangers/rangersreport_nov-30-2017_reducedsize.pdf.

³ Ibid. The Ombudsman found this to be true both in terms of accessing mental health benefits through the Canadian forces, and Veteran’s Affairs benefits. The Ombudsman found that 89% of Rangers injured in the line of duty did not submit claims for Veteran’s Benefits.

⁴ For example, there is currently only one addictions treatment centre in Inuit Nunangat; Isuarsivik located in Kuujjuaq, Nunavik. Isuarsivik is a non-profit rehabilitation centre specializing in the treatment of substance, drug and alcohol abuse. Nearly all Inuit Nunangat residents who require addictions treatment must leave our homeland for addictions treatment centres in southern Canada, often at great expense to provincial and territorial governments. The limited accessibility of addictions treatment is a disincentive for those who require the most support, and treatment centres in the south are in most cases not Inuit-specific or provided in Inuktitut, the Inuit language.

Assistance might come in the form of translation assistance, as well as in expedited processes or assistance with record keeping, reporting and paperwork to secure benefits.

The social infrastructure deficit is considerably more challenging because the deficit in social infrastructure is pervasive. Increased social infrastructure in Inuit Nunangat would be beneficial not only to Veteran's, but to youth, women, families and men. The social infrastructure deficit is even more concerning when one considers the likelihood that service members in particular are likely to experience trauma requiring mental health supports.

The government of Canada, and particularly Veterans Affairs Canada, with the support of the Department of Defence, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern and Intergovernmental Affairs should coordinate resources to ensure there is adequate social infrastructure across Inuit Nunangat. By sharing resources where there exist overlapping mandates, departments will be in a better position to deliver better outcomes for Veterans, for Inuit and for all people living in Inuit Nunangat. A healthier Inuit Nunangat also means healthier communities and healthier Rangers protecting and maintaining our shared sovereignty.

In addition, Veterans Affairs Canada should consider linking and coordinating strategies for serving veterans in Inuit Nunangat with other strategies and action plans.⁵ Just as no Veteran should ever feel isolated or remote when their needs are greatest, Veteran's Affairs does not need to be alone in serving Veterans in Inuit Nunangat.⁶ Veteran's Affairs should consider coordination of these issues with the National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy as well as provincial or territorial action plans devoted to mental health. Federally, improving services for veterans should be a key priority for collaboration with respect to the Arctic Policy Framework.

However, in the absence of local social infrastructure, there are additional barriers, such as the need to secure travel benefits to travel to less remote locations, as well as the need to develop treatment plans which either take place far from the community or take place far from medical supervision. As a transitional measure, until social infrastructure is available in Inuit Nunangat, delivery agencies should implement relaxed travel requirements for Veteran's seeking services outside of their communities. The Standing Committee should recommend relaxing requirements around the documentation required to secure travel, the allowable costs of travel and the ability to travel with a support person. The latter is particularly important in terms of ameliorating the sense of isolation and dislocation many Veterans would likely experience, seeking services in southern Canada.

One important step for Canada would be to publicly acknowledge the contribution of Canadian Rangers to protecting Canada's sovereignty. Such an open public acknowledgement would serve to remind all Canadians of the valuable and ongoing contribution of Rangers to Canadian society. It would also serve

⁵ For example, the Inuit Nunangat Housing Strategy, which 2018 Inuit Nunangat Housing Strategy. The Strategy sets out a number of specific commitments to build on recent, direct federal investments to achieve the shared vision of improving and sustaining housing outcomes in line with outcomes in the rest of Canada.

⁶ For example, the National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy sets as a goal, "Ensure access to Inuit-specific mental health services and supports, particularly services that address health promotion, suicide prevention, and interventions for those who are at risk of suicide or have attempted suicide." Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy, online:

<https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ITK-National-Inuit-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy-2016.pdf>.

as an important reminder that while Rangers may live and work in remote regions of Canada, they are not remote *from* Canada.

In addition, Canada should engage in better tracking of outcomes for all Veterans, and particularly for indigenous veterans and veterans in Inuit Nunangat. Indigenous peoples are more likely than other Canadians to suffer depressed economic and social outcomes, and Rangers in particular are more likely to experience fatal outcomes than other members of the Canadian Forces. Regular, public reporting of health outcomes for Rangers will encourage the development of more constructive and creative proposals, based on evidence, to improve outcomes for Inuit Veterans.

Recommendations

The Standing Committee should:

- Consider of recommendations from the Canadian Forces Ombudsman on improvements to policies, programs and, if necessary, legislation to improve the accessibility of services offered through Veteran's Affairs to Inuit.
- Call for closer government collaboration with Inuit, in terms of interdepartmental and intergovernmental collaboration, to create more social infrastructure within Inuit Nunangat
- Recommend Improved coordination between Canadian Forces, Veteran's Affairs and other federal departments on how to contribute to, and take advantage of, existing federal, provincial or territorial strategies and action plans, particularly around provision of service for improved mental wellness
- Recommend the government of Canada, in collaboration with current and retired Canadian Rangers, commemorate and publicly acknowledge the contribution of Canadian Rangers to maintaining Canadian sovereignty
- Recommend that Veteran's Affairs Canada implement a system for Improved tracking of services provided and health outcomes for Inuit veterans and former members.