

Minister
of Veterans Affairs



Ministre
des Anciens Combattants

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0P4

Mr. Neil R. Ellis, MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs
131 Queen Street, 6th Floor
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Colleague:

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, I am pleased to provide a Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs' third report entitled *Reaching Out: Improving Service Delivery to Canadian Veterans*, due to be tabled in Parliament by April 7, 2017.

I have read your report with interest and value the observations made. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and the members of the Standing Committee for your work and dedication.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Kent Hehr, PC, MP

Enclosure

c.c.: The Honourable Harjit S. Sajjan, PC, OMM, MSM, CD, MP
Minister of National Defence

Mr. Patrick Williams
Clerk, Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs' Third Report *"Reaching Out: Improving Service Delivery to Canadian Veterans"*

The Government of Canada welcomes the opportunity to respond to recommendations made in the third report of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. The Government would like to thank both the Committee for this report and the over 70 witnesses who appeared before the Committee from March 2016 to December 2016.

The Committee undertook a comprehensive study of service delivery provide to Veterans and their families. The approach involved evaluating programs and services from the perspective of Veterans and their families to determine if these programs and services, as currently designed and delivered, achieve their intended outcomes.

The Government endeavours to improve service delivery to Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans and their families and values your suggestions on possible ways to improve its service delivery model. The Government is pleased to provide you with a recommendation-by-recommendation response on the progress made to address your concerns.

Committee Recommendation 1

That Veterans Affairs Canada establish an in-person service to help Veterans learn about the services and programs they are eligible for, and to help them complete the paperwork required for these services and programs.

Government Response 1

The Government agrees with efforts to help Veterans navigate through the numerous benefits and support provided. Veterans Affairs Canada currently provides in-person services through its offices located across the country, as well as a national network of 24 Integrated Personnel Support Centres located on Department of National Defence bases and 558 Service Canada locations across the country.

As part of enhanced transition services introduced in 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada provides medically releasing members (at least six months prior to their release) with information on departmental benefits and services so that they are better prepared to transition to civilian life. In addition, through the in-person transition interview, information on benefits and services, including advice and guidance on completing applications, is provided to all releasing members. Veterans Affairs Canada is also currently piloting a guided support project to assist certain Veterans by providing personalized, one to one service. This pilot is designed to provide a single point of contact for Veterans with the service and support they need. On completion, the pilot will be assessed and findings will determine future direction.

Committee Recommendation 2

That Veterans Affairs Canada work with provincial ministries of health and professional associations to foster better cooperation from health care professionals and assist them when they must fill out the forms required by Veterans to be eligible for the Department's programs and services.

Government Response 2

Veterans Affairs Canada's medical officials work collaboratively with medical associations, particularly the College of Family Physicians of Canada, to sensitize family doctors of Veterans' health issues through educational activities and presentations. In addition, all departmental medical questionnaires are currently being reviewed and simplified so that essential information is still captured, while decreasing the workload of physicians.

Committee Recommendation 3

That the Canadian Armed Forces provide serving members with their complete digitalized medical file as soon as a permanent medical category has been assigned.

Government Response 3

The Government agrees in principle with this recommendation and, continues to work towards a seamless exchange of digitalized medical information between the member, Canadian Armed Forces medical providers and Veterans Affairs Canada, working within the limitations of existing technology. Canadian Armed Forces members may at any time informally request a paper copy of their medical record in whole, or in part. This is accomplished by way of a request to the Canadian Forces Health Services Centre Health Records Department at their location.

The unencumbered sharing of medical information between Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada is critical for informed and rapid medical assessment for Veterans Affairs Canada benefits and services. In 2013, the Canadian Forces Health Services created the Health Records Disclosure Team for such purposes. All Veterans Affairs Canada requests for health records are directed to this team. In 2016 alone, the team processed approximately 11,000 requests. This process ensures that the appropriate information is transferred and that all medically releasing members' needs are met rapidly. Additionally, both medically and non-medically releasing Canadian Armed Forces members have the ability to request a personal copy of their medical files using other internal means.

Committee Recommendation 4

That Veterans Affairs Canada immediately improve the user interface of "My VAC Account", and eliminate the requirement for Veterans to provide their banking information upon registration for a "My VAC Account", knowing that, if needed, this information could be requested later on.

Government Response 4

The Government is aware that some Veterans are uncomfortable with the “Sign-In Partner” process, which uses the Veteran’s online banking username and password to access My VAC Account. No personal banking information is shared with the Government when users sign in via this process. The Sign-In Partner simply verifies the user’s username and password. Similarly, no information about the government service being accessed will be shared with the user’s financial institution. While the Government encourages this process, given its convenience and safety, people can opt to use the Government’s other standard process, “GCKey”, where users create a unique ID and password to access Government online services, including My VAC Account. Veteran Affairs Canada has updated its communications to better convey these two options.

To ensure that changes to My VAC Account are user-friendly, new features are tested with Veterans prior to release. Input from this testing and Veterans’ feedback are used to inform the user interface design and prioritize updates to My VAC Account.

Committee Recommendation 5

That Veterans who have been assigned a case manager be allowed to contact that person directly by email and/or telephone.

Government Response 5

The Government agrees with the intent of this recommendation to provide efficient and effective communications with Veterans. Case managers at Veterans Affairs Canada have discretion to provide their phone number to Veterans who have a need for more direct contact. Veterans Affairs Canada also uses Secure Messaging through My VAC Account to allow Veterans to communicate with departmental staff, including case managers, in a safe and secure environment. Secure Messaging allows case managers to better manage files and respond to Veterans in a timelier manner. Email communication is not used as it does not meet security requirements for the exchange of personal information.

Committee Recommendation 6

That Veterans Affairs Canada and the Veterans Review and Appeal Board accelerate their efforts to hire as many Veterans as possible in all sectors and at all levels of their organizations, using a gender-balanced approach that would reflect the adequate proportion of female Veterans.

Government Response 6

The Government agrees with the merit of hiring additional Veterans in all sectors and at all levels of the public service. Amendments made in 2015 to the *Public Service Employment Act*

have provided increased access to hiring opportunities in the federal public service for certain serving and former members of the Canadian Armed Forces. The Government is also fully committed to Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) and is undertaking initiatives with a gender based analysis lens, including the hiring of Veterans within the federal public service.

Veterans Affairs Canada has taken a leadership role to advance hiring opportunities for Veterans by creating the Veterans Hiring Unit within the Department. Its objective is to increase the number of Veterans employed at Veterans Affairs Canada and help establish the federal public service as a Veteran hiring leader within Canada. In addition, the Department has recently accepted responsibility to administer the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires Right of First Refusal Policy, which provide Veterans with hiring opportunities.

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board receives human resources services from Veterans Affairs Canada and is engaged in, and benefits from, initiatives like the Veterans Hiring Unit. The Board and Veterans Affairs Canada work together to ensure that staffing processes are open and responsive to Canadian Armed Forces members and Veterans. Board members are appointed by the Governor in Council through a process that also recognizes the value of experience in the military and policing. The Government's new approach to Governor in Council appointments, announced in 2016, will benefit the Board and Veterans through its stated goal of attracting high-quality candidates who achieve gender parity and reflect Canada's diversity.

Committee Recommendation 7

That the Veterans Review and Appeal Board:

- Make public how it interprets its application of the “benefit of the doubt” rule;
- Better communicate with Veterans before an audience to make sure that the rules of procedure are well understood, and that during the audience, Board members ensure Veterans that they will remain the Board's main priority;
- Provide to Veterans Affairs Canada the necessary feedback on the reasons why the Department's initial decisions have been overturned.

Government Response 7

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board recognizes that its decision making processes should be open and accessible to the public. To this end, the Board developed and published a plain language explanation of the “benefit of the doubt” rule on its website in 2012 in response to recommendations from the Veterans Ombudsman and stakeholder feedback. In 2015, the Ombudsman's follow-up report found that the Board had done significant work to ensure its decisions clearly explain how the “benefit of the doubt” rule is applied to the facts and evidence in every case. The Board continues to focus on fair, plain language decisions for Veterans through training and support for its members and publishes its decisions on the Canadian Legal Information Institute's website so the public can read how the rule is applied.

The Board recognizes the need for effective communications so that Veterans understand, and benefit from, the appeal process. To this end, in 2017 it is introducing rules of procedure and developing a series of short videos about the hearing process. The Board will continue to ask Veterans for feedback on their hearing experience through an exit survey established in 2013.

The Board tracks the reasons why it overturns the Department's initial decisions and makes this information accessible to Veterans Affairs Canada. This practice was put in place in response to a recommendation made in a 2012 Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs report.

Committee Recommendation 8

That Veterans Affairs Canada, before denying a claim, communicate with the Veteran to identify the relevant information that the Veteran would need to provide in order to gain a better chance at a successful claim.

Government Response 8

The Government recognizes the value of communicating with Veterans, especially where it may impact eligibility decisions. Veterans Affairs Canada currently contacts Veterans whose applications are missing key information and whose claims may benefit from the inclusion of additional information. This practice was put in place, in part, in response to the 2012 Veterans Ombudsman's Report "Veterans' Right to Disclosure: A Matter of Procedural Fairness".

Committee Recommendation 9

That Veterans Affairs Canada and the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, if a claim is denied, clearly communicate to the Veteran the reasons for the denial.

Government Response 9

The Government agrees with this recommendation. Veterans Affairs Canada and the Veterans Review and Appeal Board communicate the reasons for their decisions and rulings, including those that are unfavorable, in writing to Veterans. In response to recommendations from the Veterans Ombudsman (made in 2011 and 2012 reports), both have made significant efforts to use plain language so that decisions are clear and easy to understand.

In 2015, the Veterans Ombudsman's follow-up report found that the Veterans Review and Appeal Board had done significant work to provide Veterans with clear reasons for its decisions. In February 2017, the Veterans Ombudsman released a status update on recommendations he has made. While recognizing that Veterans Affairs Canada has made improvements, the Ombudsman indicated his 2011 recommendation to write decisions in plain language was only partially implemented. The Department is currently undertaking an internal letter review process to ensure letters use plain language, and will make any necessary updates.

Committee Recommendation 10

That medically releasing members be considered released only once Veterans Affairs Canada has made a final adjudication on their applications for benefits and once all health, rehabilitation and vocational services have been put in place.

Government Response 10

Recent changes to legislation provides Veterans Affairs Canada the ability, where appropriate, to consider applications and make decisions on eligibility for departmental program benefits and services prior to the member's release, assisting their transition to civilian life.

Committee Recommendation 11

That the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada work together to create a one-stop shop, or "concierge service", through which one individual would serve as the single point of contact for medically releasing members and would coordinate the services offered by the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada before, during and after release.

Government Response 11

The recommendation aligns in principle with the guided support project currently being piloted by Veterans Affairs Canada. Guided support means Veterans and their families are fully managed by one individual who becomes their primary point of contact at Veterans Affairs Canada. Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces are working together to establish a unified and integrated transition process, to support the re-establishment in civilian life for all releasing members and their families. This process will be Veteran-centric and navigation assistance will be provided by Veterans Affairs Canada staff throughout, to aid transitioning members in accessing departmental program benefits and services.

Committee Recommendation 12

That Veterans Affairs Canada, in cooperation with the Department of National Defence, provide Canadian Armed Forces recruits with a Veteran's identity card and open their "My VAC Account" as soon as they begin military service, and provide regular updates and training on the changes made to its programs and services.

Government Response 12

The Government is currently exploring options to develop a national Veterans Identification Card that would be an official Government of Canada identification for all Veterans. Veterans Affairs Canada is working closely with the Department of National Defence, the Canadian

Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman to advance this initiative.

Veterans Affairs Canada is continually enhancing the functionalities of My VAC Account, and in cooperation with the Canadian Armed Forces, is encouraging members to apply for My VAC Account while they are still serving. As part of the new transition model, the seamless transition begins early on in one's military career with a registration for a My VAC Account. Preparation to transition members will be part of a professional development approach throughout their career. This earlier engagement with Veterans Affairs Canada will allow members to be kept abreast of the suite of programs and services offered (and any changes or updates), both during and after their military career.

Committee Recommendation 13

That Veterans Affairs Canada conduct an analysis of its handling of applications for financial benefits and services associated with injuries or illnesses that are a result of injuries and illnesses for which a link to military service has already been established, and that the results of this analysis be submitted to the Committee.

Government Response 13

Veterans Affairs Canada agrees with the importance of effectively managing disability benefit applications for injuries or illnesses claimed to be a consequential result of service related injuries and illnesses. Processes are in place to manage the handling of these applications and Medical Directives and guidelines are available to guide decision makers on conditions for which medically accepted consequential relationships have already been established. These are updated when applicable emerging medical information becomes available. Departmental medical health professionals provide medical advice and guidance to decision makers as required. Work is also underway to explore the management and streamlining of applications for conditions which are a consequence of service-related mental health conditions.

Committee Recommendation 14

That Veterans Affairs Canada review its strategy for long-term care and consider offering contract beds to modern-day Veterans who need them, in addition to the homecare provided through the Veterans Independence Program.

Government Response 14

The Government agrees on the need to review its current approach to health care programming provided to Veterans. Veterans Affairs Canada is currently partnering with provincial health authorities and long term care facilities across the country to address the changing needs and demographics of the Veteran population. For example, in the past year Veterans' access to long term care beds has been expanded at: Camp Hill Veterans Memorial

Building in Halifax, Nova Scotia; Sunnybrook Veterans Centre in Toronto, Ontario; Parkwood Institute in London, Ontario; and Perley Rideau Veterans Health Centre in Ottawa, Ontario, through new agreements with the institutions themselves or their applicable health authorities. Discussions are ongoing with other facilities and health authorities in other jurisdictions.

In addition, a Veteran and family health strategy is under development that will outline the Department's strategic approach, priorities and action plan for Veteran and family health, including plans related to Long Term Care and the Veterans Independence Program.

Committee Recommendation 15

- That the long-term disability coverage of the Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP) be offered only to Veterans whose disability leading to medical release is not related to their military service;
- that all Veterans being released for medical reasons related to their military service be eligible for the programs under the New Veterans Charter;
- that the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada work together to eliminate as quickly as possible the overlap between SISIP programs and programs offered by Veterans Affairs Canada; and
- that Veterans Affairs Canada eliminate the requirement that application for its vocational rehabilitation program be submitted within 120 days after release.

Government Response 15

In combination with ongoing improvements to transition services and the introduction of a guided support function, Veterans Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defence are working to develop options to simplify and consolidate their income support and rehabilitation programs in order to eliminate overlap and gaps and provide Veterans and releasing Canadian Armed Forces members with a seamless transition experience.

Essential aspects of this ongoing work include the examination of:

- the Canadian Armed Forces long-term disability and vocational rehabilitation coverage;
- the income support and rehabilitation programs under the New Veterans Charter; and
- other policies and protocols associated with these programs.

Committee Recommendation 16

That Veterans Affairs Canada, when the Veteran participates in, or is eligible for a rehabilitation program, provide access to a reasonable number of free sessions of psychological care to spouses, common-law partners, dependent children, and caregivers (as defined in section 2 (1) of the New Veterans Charter, or section 16 (3) of the Veterans Health Care Regulations), and that they be able to apply for such care without prior authorization from the Veteran.

Government Response 16

The Government recognizes that supportive and supported families are key to the well-being of Veterans. In this regard, Veterans Affairs Canada may provide medical and psychosocial services to spouses/common-law partners or survivors who are eligible for vocational assistance, if necessary to achieve their vocational goals. The Department also provides free confidential, professional counselling through its VAC Assistance Service. This 24/7 service is delivered through a nation-wide team of mental health professionals who provide psychological support to Veterans and their families (up to 20 sessions per issue), regardless if they are in receipt of benefits and services from Veterans Affairs Canada.

Committee Recommendation 17

That Veterans Affairs Canada provide training and financial compensation to spouses, common-law partners, dependent children, and caregivers (as defined in section 2 (1) of the New Veterans Charter, or section 16 (3) of the Veterans Health Care Regulations) who provide care to the Veteran.

Government Response 17

The Government acknowledges the vital contribution informal caregivers (normally spouses/common-law partners) make to the health and well-being of Veterans requiring ongoing support. In recognition of this, Veterans Affairs Canada provides financial compensation to eligible Veterans, through its Family Caregiver Relief Benefit, to ensure that they get the needed support, normally provided by informal caregivers, when their caregivers take time off to recharge or attend to their own health and well-being. The Department also provides financial support to eligible spouses/common-law partners for training costs (e.g., tuition and books) as part of its Rehabilitation Services and Vocational Assistance Program. Further, Veterans Affairs Canada is currently developing an interactive online training tool to help caregivers of Veterans with physical and mental health conditions support themselves and their loved ones. This online tool, expected to be launched in 2017, will include personalized action plans, educational materials, peer support, facilitation and participant engagement.

Committee Recommendation 18

That the Veterans Review and Appeal Board table to the Committee its most recent decisions in cases involving sexual harassment and abuse, and make sure that individuals involved in these cases cannot be identified.

Government Response 18

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board will depersonalize and provide its most recent decisions involving sexual harassment to the Committee at the same time as tabling this Government

Response in the House of Commons. These decisions are available on the Canadian Legal Information Institute's website along with other Board decisions, which are searchable by key word.