



Public Service Alliance of Canada
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada

Submission by

the Public Service Alliance of Canada

and

the Union of National Defence Employees

to the

House of Commons Standing Committee
on Government Operations and Estimates

re

Hiring Veterans for Public Service Positions

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The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) is the largest union in the federal public sector representing over 180,000 members from coast to coast to coast. This is a joint submission by PSAC and its Union of National Defence (UNDE) component. Our members work closely with both veterans and Canadian Forces personnel.

Introduction

In October 2013, the Veterans Ombudsman reported that the government of the day was failing the most severely wounded and disabled soldiers.

The government responded with the introduction of Bill C-27, *An Act to amend the Public Service Employment Act (enhancing hiring opportunities for certain serving and former members of the Canadian Forces) – or the Veterans Hiring Act* - which gave Canadian Forces personnel who are released for medical reasons attributable to their service, top statutory priority above all other statutory and regulatory priorities for positions in the federal public service.

At the time, we welcomed these potential new members. However, before both House of Commons and Senate committees reviewing the bill, we expressed serious concerns about the work environment they would be entering.

We noted at the time that veterans who are returning to work with a disability, particularly a stress-related disability such as PTSD, must have reintegration services available to them. The *Veterans Hiring Act* made no such provision. Neither did it provide for any specialized training or accommodation to fully integrate and support them in their new jobs.

The situation today

Former military personnel are coming into the federal public service with mental or physical disabilities or both. It has been our experience that all too often, as they exhibit symptoms, e.g. related to PTSD, they are disciplined and their employment terminated.

The Department of National Defence has statistics on the number of former military personnel who are hired into their department in public service positions. In fact, they are proud of the fact that the vast majority of veterans are hired by the department. Unfortunately, they do not have – or at least have not shared with us – the numbers of those who have subsequently left either through termination or resignation and after how long a period of employment.

What we do know is that we are seeing an increase in the number of our members who were in the military coming to the union who are facing termination of employment.

We suspect this is the tip of the iceberg because members who were in the military are not familiar with unions and may be reluctant to come forward for our help or be

unaware of the support they could receive from their union. They may also be reluctant to disclose personal information as a result of being conditioned by the military culture.

We know that some do not wait to be terminated. They do not want to be put through another stressful situation. Even if they do come to their union for assistance, or understand that they can challenge their termination through the grievance procedure, the reality is that the grievance process is lengthy and the stress of the process can contribute to exacerbating any mental or physical disabilities they may have.

We have also found that managers are ill-equipped to help former military personnel who are exhibiting symptoms in the workplace or to support other workers who may be upset by, or fear for their safety due to behaviors they don't understand.

We recently discussed this with the Public Service Commission which is also aware of these problems. Although follow-up isn't within their legislated mandate, in their discussions with Departments and veterans they have also become aware of a retention problem once veterans are hired.

Fit for work and fit for the job

Military personnel have military physicians. When they leave the military, they have up to five years to get on the priority system for hiring into the federal public service. However, they are immediately removed from the military medical rolls and must find a civilian physician.

Finding a civilian physician is not necessarily an easy task, particularly one who understands the needs of disabled veterans. We have observed that physicians in walk-in clinics may assess a veteran as fit for work, without rigorously assessing whether or not that is actually the case.

Recommendations

- We recommend there be a transition period during which a veteran can continue to access military physicians and other medical personnel until they can find an appropriate civilian practitioner. This transition period should continue until the veteran has obtained a position in the federal public service.
- We also recommend that the military physician be the physician to assess veterans' fitness for the public service position.

When civilian DND employees are injured, they are required to pass a fitness assessment which considers the requirements of the employee's specific position with the employee's abilities. Accommodations are made as required. Without the necessary accommodations, veterans are being set up to fail.

Recommendation

- We recommend a similar process for assessing and accommodating veterans entering the public service.

While veterans may be assessed as fit to work, there is no assessment regarding their fitness for the job. There appears to be little effort to find the right fit. This is another example of setting up veterans to fail.

Recommendation

- We recommend that better processes be put in place to ensure veterans entering the public service are being put in positions better suited to their abilities and that the necessary training be provided, as required.

DND says it has a support structure which it encourages veteran employees to contact for assistance. We can only speak from the experience of the veterans who are our members who have come to the union for assistance but who have never mentioned it. If such a support system is in place, it is not reaching at least some of the people who need it.

Recommendation

- We recommend the department work with the Union of National Defence Employees to ensure that both parties are involved in this support structure and that the structure is promoted and easily accessible.

Conclusion

It is clear that the problems veterans face being integrated into the civilian ranks of the public service cross departmental and organizational lines and require a systemic approach in order to find solutions.

This approach needs to honestly assess veterans' needs before they decide to return to work and support them more thoroughly than it currently does when they do. In order to do this properly current legislative and administrative barriers need to be closely examined and amended if required.