



NATIONAL
POLICE
FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION
DE LA POLICE
NATIONALE

BACKLOG OF DISABILITY BENEFIT CLAIMS AT DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS STANDING COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS AFFAIRS

November 2020



NPF Contact:

Sarah Nolan, Director, Government Relations

snolan@npf-fpn.com

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The National Police Federation (NPF) is the sole certified bargaining agent representing close to 20,000 front-line Members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) across Canada and internationally. The NPF is the largest police labour relations organization in Canada and is the first independent national association to represent RCMP Members. The NPF is focused on improving public safety in Canada and on increasing resources, equipment, training and supports for our Members. Better resourcing and support for the RCMP will enhance community safety and livability in the communities we serve, large and small, across Canada.

Earlier this year, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) reported a 150 per cent increase in the backlog of pending applicants for disability claims, from just over 20,000 in March 2017 to just under 50,000 in June 2020. This backlog directly impacts many RCMP Members as VAC is responsible for providing disability and rehabilitation services and benefits to serving and retired RCMP officers. The RCMP currently provides funding to VAC for Disability Pensions and Special Awards, which comprises the adjudication and administration of claims related to work-related illness, injury, or death. This funding is outlined under the Grant to Compensate Members of the RCMP for Injuries Received in the Performance of Their Duties, referred to as the “Grant” throughout.

Our Members are experiencing issues resulting from VAC’s overall cumbersome process, from long applicant wait times, and from case managers not factoring in the uniqueness of RCMP Member applications. More specifically, because most VAC clients are Canadian Armed Forces Members (CAF), policies have been designed more around their needs than others’.

All factors that are contributing to the backlog need to be carefully assessed, in order to deliver timely and appropriate solutions that enable successful long-term planning for VAC. This process should include tangible benchmarking to mitigate the effects of the current backlog.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Simplify the decision-making process for systemic and typical medical conditions and implement a system to efficiently approve the most common disability applications.
2. Fast-track applications for clients who are medically at risk or have an urgent and immediate health needs.
3. Ensure staffing levels over the next five years are in line with forecasted client needs and numbers, while providing sufficient training and specialized staffing to deal with more complex cases more effectively and efficiently.
4. Ensure future application processes are streamlined for both online and in-person interactions to assist in meeting service standard levels in a timely manner.
5. Regularly and proactively review all data and reports available through VAC and the RCMP in order to identify emerging risks, and provide sufficient resources to mitigate them going forward, including how implementation of new government programs will impact applicant intake.

RCMP DISABILITY BENEFITS RECIPIENTS

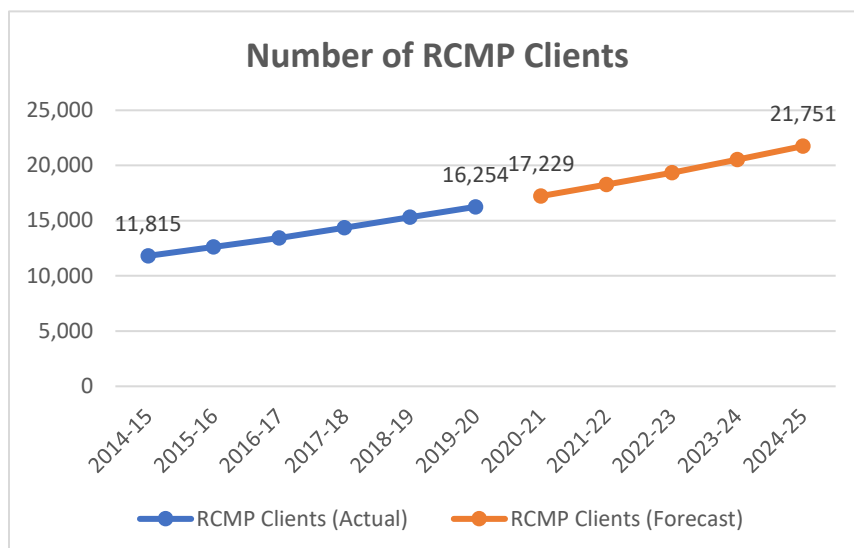


Table 1: Based on future projections in the *Evaluation of the Grant to Compensate Members of the RCMP for Injuries Received in the Performance of their Duties-Full Report*, July 2019.

As of March 2019, there were 16,254 RCMP disability benefits recipientsⁱ. Over the past five years, there has been a 38% increase in recipients. RCMP and VAC future forecasting shows that the number of RCMP Members receiving a disability benefit will continue to increase at a rate of about 6% annuallyⁱⁱ. At this rate, by 2024-25 RCMP clients receiving a disability benefit could increase to over 21,000 (Table 1).

One of the primary challenges contributing to the backlog is that VAC is unable to meet its

service standards. For first-time applicants, the service standard is that 80% are to be processed in 16 weeks. Today, only about 33% are processed within 16 weeks. Most decisions are being made after 6 months (24 weeks)ⁱⁱⁱ.

On a positive note, considering the increasing number of general applicants, data shows that approval rates for disability benefits for RCMP Members is not an issue, with 88% of RCMP first application decisions favourably providing needed supports and services^{iv}.

It is important to highlight that, despite an increasing number of RCMP Members applying to receive disability benefits, the annual amount transferred from the RCMP to VAC had not increased since 2003-04. In 2018, the government updated the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the RCMP and VAC, which provided an increase of \$2 million annually, for services provided to RCMP clients.

The increased funding better reflects the critical services VAC provides for RCMP Members. Although it was expected that this funding would increase VAC's capacity to provide services and reduce backlogs and service delivery delays for RCMP Members, it is clear this was not sufficient to fully address these concerns.

While the NPF in principle supports the updated MOU, new data points to additional funding needs to support VAC's work and to decrease the backlog in approving RCMP Members' disabilities benefits and related wait times.

DESTIGMATIZATION AND AWARENESS

VAC indicates there are four main causes to the increase in the demand for services and benefits.

These include:

- growing need for mental health services;
- rising number of medically releasing Veterans;
- introduction of Pension for Life; and,
- improved outreach and communication about benefits and services.

These factors stem largely from the My VAC Account awareness campaigns the Government of Canada launched, as well as from advertising the programs and services provided to veterans under VAC. Positive de-stigmatization of mental illness by all governments and health organizations over the past decade have also played a significant role.

Between 2014 and 2019, there was a 69% increase in RCMP Members claiming psychiatric disability and receiving disability benefits^v (Table 2).

Today, the most common medical conditions reported by RCMP Members are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Tinnitus and Hearing Loss.

The growing demand for mental illness related support is a positive indication that more Members are seeking help for long-recognized and highly impactful conditions. Efforts to destigmatize and encourage Member outreach for and support for extremely debilitating and potentially fatal mental health conditions have clearly been effective.

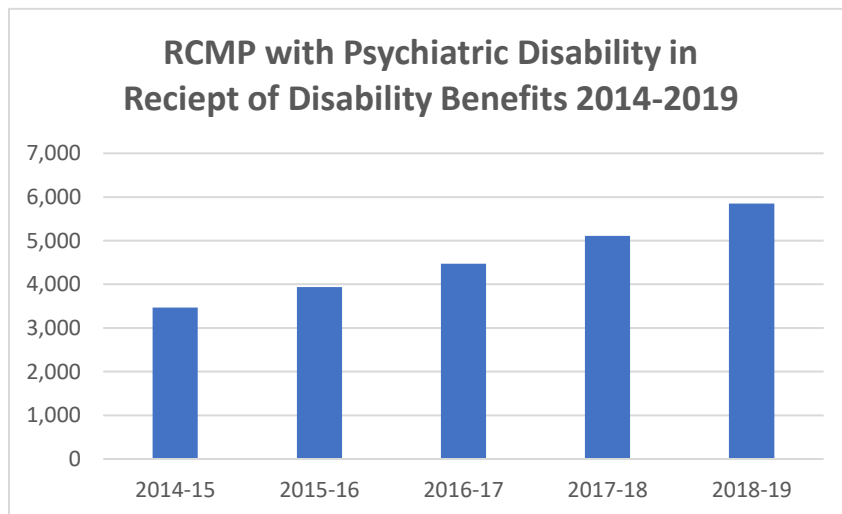


Table 2: Total RCMP in receipt of disability benefits with a Psychiatric diagnosis, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder using sources from the Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch of Veterans Affairs Canada.

The RCMP, the federal answer government, and Canadians as a whole owe a debt of gratitude to front-line Members who put their lives on the line every shift to ensure that, when the tables turn and they need our help and support, we reciprocally, responsibly and effectively. The NPF wants to ensure that anyone who bravely asks for support receives it in a timely manner. The federal government has provided significant funding for mental health resources and a commitment to advance Occupational Stress Injury treatment and care for first responders, including RCMP Members, as outlined in the September 2020 Speech from the Throne. Now, government must deliver and fulfill these critical commitments.

INVESTING IN RESOURCES

In 2014, the federal government closed several veterans' centers across Canada. The closure of these centers directly impacted veterans and, relatedly, RCMP Members who needed access to those same services^{vi}.

In 2016, the Liberal government committed to re-open these centers to facilitate access to the critical services needed to help improve quality of life. For example, Budget 2016 allocated \$78.1 million over five years to open offices and hire staff^{vii}. The government also opened a new office in Surrey, B.C., which has assisted 1,267 RCMP Members as of March 2019^{viii}. Ensuring access to these centers across the country is key to ensuring timely assistance and addressing the growing backlog.

The NPF supports the funding and provision of VAC offices across Canada and asks that the federal government ensure these offices remain open, with additional investments in staff and all necessary resources.

We also call for policies that consider and reflect the needs of each Member applicant. RCMP Members, including retired Members, represent ~10% of total applicants for disabilities benefits at VAC, funded by the RCMP Grant. Current VAC policies and training are more focused towards CAF than RCMP Members, which creates a focus which does not always serve their unique needs.

CONCLUSION

The NPF notes that the backlog at VAC is in part a result of its success in expanding services for veterans and RCMP Members and in destigmatizing mental illness. This accomplishment will ultimately save and improve the lives of those who have chosen a career in service of Canadians.

The NPF also recognizes that the federal government has made significant financial contributions to VAC to alleviate the current and unacceptable backlog and contributing factors. This includes, \$42 million over two years to reduce the case management ratio, hire more employees, and support training. Recently, the government committed an additional \$192 million in funding to increase resources to reduce the backlog.

We remain concerned over the recent report from the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) which assesses these investments and reiterates that additional supports and investments will be required to decrease the backlog. The NPF strongly encourages Committee members to review the two scenarios outlined in the report and consider the length of time each scenario estimates for the backlog to be addressed. Our Members and all veterans deserve timely and effective access to disability benefits. Doing so provides necessary and timely support to them and their families, and it acknowledges their contribution and sacrifice.

The NPF thanks the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for the opportunity to provide our recommendations for consideration in this review.

ⁱ Veterans Affairs Canada. *4.0 Disability Benefits* [online]. Available at : <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/news-media/facts-figures/4-0>

ⁱⁱ RCMP. *Evaluation of the Grant to Compensate Members of the RCMP for Injuries Received in the Performance of their Duties - Full Report* [online]. Available at: <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/evaluation-the-grant-compensate-members-the-rcmp-injuries-received-the-performance-duties-full>

ⁱⁱⁱ RCMP. *Evaluation of the Grant to Compensate Members of the RCMP for Injuries Received in the Performance of their Duties - Full Report* [online]. Available at: <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/evaluation-the-grant-compensate-members-the-rcmp-injuries-received-the-performance-duties-full>

^{iv} RCMP. *Evaluation of the Grant to Compensate Members of the RCMP for Injuries Received in the Performance of their Duties - Findings* [online]. Available at: <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/evaluation-the-grant-compensate-members-the-rcmp-injuries-received-the-performance-duties-full#fn17-rf>

^v Veterans Affairs Canada. *Facts and Figures, March 2019 Edition*. [online]. Available at : <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/about-vac/news-media/facts-figures/Facts-and-Figures-Mar-2019.pdf>

^{vi} 2014. *Harper Dismisses Concerns From Veterans Over Closures of Veterans Affairs Offices – Vets Can Still Get Everything They Want He Says*. Ottawa Citizen. [online]. Available at : <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/harper-dismisses-concerns-from-veterans-over-closures-of-veterans-affairs-offices-vets-can-still-get-everything-they-want-he-says>

^{vii} 2016. *Prime Minister re-opens Veterans Affairs Canada office in Sydney, Nova Scotia*. PMO. [online]. Available at : <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2016/11/10/prime-minister-re-opens-veterans-affairs-canada-office-sydney-nova>

^{viii} Veterans Affairs Canada. *Facts and Figures, March 2019 Edition*. [online]. Available at : <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/about-vac/news-media/facts-figures/Facts-and-Figures-Mar-2019.pdf>