



GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Mr Kevin Sorenson, M.P
Chair
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6
Canada

Dear Colleague:

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, we are pleased to provide a Government Response to your Committee's report which studied Chapter 3, *Mental Health Services for Veterans, of the Fall 2014 Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.

We have read your report with interest. The recommendation contained within the report asks both Veterans Affairs Canada and Department of National Defence to provide your committee with an update on progress made by both Departments in addressing the Office of the Auditor General's seven recommendations contained in Chapter 3 of the Fall 2014 Report. We will take this opportunity to acknowledge that the Government accepts the Auditor General's recommendations, provide you with an update on the progress we have each made in addressing them, and outline several other Mental Health initiatives, programs and services available through both Departments.

Chapter 3 of the *Fall 2014 Report of the Auditor General of Canada* contained seven recommendations. Each one will be addressed separately.

Recommendation 3.33 - Veterans Affairs Canada should analyze the Disability Benefits application process, quantify and document barriers to timeliness, and take corrective action. In particular, Veterans Affairs Canada should help those Veterans who may require additional assistance with the application process.

Response to 3.33

- One of the barriers to timely disability benefit adjudication has been the need to photocopy paper military service records and forward them to Veterans Affairs Canada. The digitization of service records is now well-established and has greatly improved the process. As of today, turnaround times for such records have been reduced to under 20 days, a vast improvement since 2013-14 when turnaround times were 70 - 90 days.
- Evidence-based decision models have been developed to simplify eligibility decisions related to less complex conditions, such as hearing loss, tinnitus and musculoskeletal conditions, which, collectively, are among the top 5 conditions adjudicated annually.
- A comprehensive training and learning strategy has been implemented to ensure that more adjudicators are equipped to render informed decisions on complex mental health or exposure conditions.

- Processes have been streamlined at all stages of the application process so that less hand-offs occur and more decision-making can take place during the intake process.
- Over the next several months, consideration also is being given to further simplify eligibility and assessment tools, streamline evidentiary requirements, and reduce the volume and complexity of applications and medical questionnaires sent to Veterans and their families.
- In 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada announced that it would hire 101 people to increase the timeliness of disability benefit decisions.

Recommendation 3.37 National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces should take further steps to accelerate the transfer of service and medical records to Veterans Affairs Canada.

Response to 3.37

- National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, Library and Archives Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada have worked together to develop an approach to service delivery that focuses on digitized, electronic platforms to process service health records more quickly.
- Enhanced Transition Services were implemented at all 24 Canadian Armed Forces Integrated Personnel Support Centres in September 2015. Enhanced Transition Services ensure that Veterans Affairs Canada case managers are engaging with medically releasing members six months prior to release to conduct in-person interviews and engage in joint case planning, as required.
- To address a backlog in files, National Defence has increased its capacity, having hired personnel in a centralized location, to provide digitized service records to Veterans Affairs more quickly. This stable workforce reviews, redacts and processes Canadian Armed Forces members' medical records before they can be shared with Veterans Affairs Canada. The initiative has brought efficiencies, sped up the process and addressed the turnaround times for program eligibility decisions and, consequently, access to mental health services by Veterans.
- As a result of technological adjustments and staffing, since October 2014, the average turnaround time for a file to be transitioned from National Defence to Veterans Affairs has dropped from an average of 52 days to a current average of 19 days.

Recommendation 3.42 - Veterans Affairs Canada should work with the Operational Stress Injury Clinics to implement solutions to provide timely access for psychological and psychiatric assessments.

Response to 3.42

- The number of psychological counselling sessions (including bereavement support) available through the Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service was expanded from 8 to 20 sessions.
- The Operational Stress Injury Clinic Network's quasi-statutory funding has been increased to provide the clinics with additional funding to hire additional mental health professionals.
- A new Operational Stress Injury Clinic opened in Nova Scotia in November 2015.
- The Greater Toronto Operational Stress Injury Clinic Satellite capacity has been expanded, a new Operational Stress Injury Clinic Satellite will also soon open South of Montreal complementing the other satellite service sites already in operation in St. John's, NFL;

Chicoutimi, QC; Pembroke and Brockville, ON; and Kelowna and Victoria, BC. These clinics are complemented by the Canadian Armed Forces network of seven Operational Trauma Stress Support Centres that serve all military personnel.

- Delivery of the Mental Health First Aid program across the country will begin in June 2016 to provide mental health literacy to Canadian Veterans and their loved ones impacted by a mental health condition.
- An Operational Stress Injury Web Portal has been developed and is being used in the Operational Stress Injury Clinics to capture the percentage of time the Clinics achieve their wait time standard. A semi-annual report is prepared to identify where enhancements are needed.
- Service standards on wait times to access psychological and psychiatric assessment and treatment have been established. The standards are:
 - 80% of clients assessments completed by clinics in 30 days;
 - 80% of clients start treatment in 30 days; and
 - 80% of clients access psychiatric care, if required, in 60 days.
- Criteria to measure and minimize wait times have been developed.
- In addition, Veterans Affairs Canada has hired 15 additional Peer Support Coordinators for the Operational Stress Injury Social Support Program to conduct outreach and ensure timely peer support is available to CAF personnel, Veterans and their families across the country as needed.

Recommendation 3.43 - National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces should work with the Operational and Trauma Stress Support Centres to implement solutions to provide timely access for psychological and psychiatric assessments.

Response to 3.43

- National Defence has been tracking wait times on a monthly basis to determine factors contributing to wait times beyond the established benchmark.
- The new Operational Stress Injury Clinic in Nova Scotia will possess Tele-mental health capacity for those living in limited service areas thus improving access to treatment for those who have difficulty to travel to the clinic.
- As well, National Defence is also addressing mental health issues with measures such as expanding the Road to Mental Readiness educational training to reach all Canadian Armed Forces members and their families. Seventeen additional personnel and medical professionals have been assigned and trained to deliver the program.

Recommendation 3.47 Veterans Affairs Canada should work with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board to identify whether reasons for successful reviews and appeals indicate a need to modify the application process.

Response to 3.47

- A review and analysis of select favourable Veterans Review and Appeal Board decisions was completed in 2015. The review found that 1) unlike the application process at the Departmental level, the first level of review at Veterans Review and Appeal Board offers applicants the

opportunity to provide oral testimony in addition to the written application which appears beneficial to the applicant; 2) the ability to provide new evidence on appeal is a factor; and 3) clarifying operational policies would improve decision-making consistency between the Department and the Board.

- Since that time, Veterans Affairs Canada has modified internal adjudication processes to include calling applicants prior to rendering a negative decision, to allow them the opportunity to provide additional evidence. The Department will monitor whether this new process results in less claims being overturned on appeal. Operational policies are being clarified to improve decision-making consistency.
- Departmental officials, including personnel from policy, operations and program management service delivery meet quarterly with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board to discuss findings from the review and analysis of overturned decisions.

Recommendation 3.58 - Veterans Affairs Canada should update its outreach strategy to include family physicians. The Department should also carry out an outreach strategy that meets the needs of all target audiences.

Response to 3.58

- The 2014-2015 Veterans Affairs Canada Outreach Annual Plan is complete. It includes outreach to Canadian Armed Forces Regular and Reserve members, Veterans, their families and family physicians.
- Workshops have been held with family physicians and general practitioners to explore the most effective ways to deliver information to family doctors on Veterans Affairs Canada programs and services.
- A Working Group with broad based representation was formed to implement the recommendations and develop new tools and approaches.

Recommendation 3.67 - Veterans Affairs Canada should assess and report on the effectiveness of its Mental Health Strategy and develop performance measures for its strategy and outreach activities for Veterans with mental health conditions.

Response to 3.67

- The Veterans Affairs Canada Mental Health Strategy has been reviewed and updated; its implementation is in progress.
- Additional performance measures are being developed to complement and add to the existing performance measures to assess the effectiveness of the Mental Health Strategy.
- An electronic system called CROMIS, available in all Operational Stress Injury Clinics, captures patient treatment outcomes. The information obtained from CROMIS is used by the clinicians to assess how the patient is doing and progressing in time with the treatment provided. The clinicians use the information from CROMIS to evaluate the treatment plan with the patient and to adapt it as required. With time, the information gathered with CROMIS will inform on the effectiveness of treatment modalities used in the clinics and help adapt treatment for better outcomes.

As mentioned above, in addition to the progress made on the Auditor General's recommendations, you will find below a list of Veterans Affairs Canada's comprehensive suite of mental health services and supports, available to both Veterans and their families. Using a comprehensive continuum of care approach, Veterans Affairs Canada supports and services include:

- Medical, psycho-social and vocational rehabilitation services, financial and health care benefits, disability awards, and career transition services provided through the New Veterans Charter.
- Transition services which may start as soon as six months prior to the member's release.
- Access to 24 Integrated Personnel Support Centres provide one-stop access to care and support to Veterans and still-serving members.
- Transition interviews for releasing Canadian Armed Forces and Royal Canadian Mounted Police members and their families to minimize gaps in service delivery and to ensure a smooth transition.
- For Veterans and retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police members with complex needs, Veterans Affairs Canada case management services.
- Registered community mental health professionals available nationally.
- Registered community clinical care managers to provide intensive case management.
- Access to outpatient multidisciplinary treatment teams, and specialized in-patient treatment centres for those Veterans who have both operational stress injuries and substance abuse issues.
- Non-denominational pastoral care services through the Pastoral Outreach Program to Veterans and their families.
- A series of free online and mobile applications.
- An Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training being delivered to all Veterans Affairs Canada case managers and other front line staff across the country.
- Veterans Affairs Canada and National Defence working together to update and develop a joint suicide prevention strategy for Canadian Armed Forces personnel and Veterans.

Similarly, National Defence places the highest priority on caring and supporting our ill and injured men and women in uniform. National Defence has also steadily improved mental health services for Canadian Armed Forces members, by addressing mental health stigma, improving the availability of mental health treatment, providing greater support to families and better harnessing technology and research. In addition, National Defence has also led the development of several smaller, joint initiatives with Veterans Affairs Canada to improve mental health care for Canadian Armed Forces members and Veterans. This includes the establishment of a Mental Health Expert Panel to review and validate Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada's mental health programs and suicide prevention activities, an increase in support to the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, and finally the creation of a Centre of Excellence in Military and Veterans Mental Health established within the Canadian Forces Health Services Group in collaboration with Veterans Affairs Canada. The Centre focuses on conducting research and collaborating with scientific experts on unique aspects of military and Veterans mental health and translating that knowledge into clinical care.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank you and the members of the Standing Committee for your work and dedication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'K. Hehr', written in a cursive style.

The Honourable Kent Hehr, P.C., M.P.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Harjit Sajjan', written in a cursive style.

The Honourable Harjit Sajjan, P.C., O.M.N., M.S.M., C.D., M.P.