

Evaluation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman

Final Report

PREPARED FOR: Office of the Veterans Ombudsman

PREPARED BY: **Goss Gilroy Inc.**
Management Consultants
Suite 900, 150 Metcalfe Street
Ottawa, ON K2P 1P1
Tel: (613) 230-5577
Fax: (613) 235-9592
E-mail: ggi@ggi.ca

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GOSS GILROY INC.

Management Consultants
Conseillers en gestion

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Acronyms

ACVA	House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs
ADM	Assistant Deputy Minister
ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
BPA	Bureau of Pension Advocate
CA	Comparative Assessment
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CIA	Career Impact Allowance
CIB	Critical Injury Benefit
CS	Case Study
DA	Disability Award
DM	Deputy Minister
DND	Department of National Defence
DR	Document Review
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
HR	Human Resources
KII	Key Informant Interview
MAG	Minister Advisory Group
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
O&M	Operating and Maintenance Expenses
OVO	Office of the Veterans Ombudsman
OIC	Order in Council
PIP	Performance Information Profile
PPP	Power Point Presentation
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
RCL	Royal Canadian Legion
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
SLA	Service Level Agreement
VAC	Veterans Affairs Canada
VOAC	Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council
VRAB	Veterans Review and Appeal Board

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and recommendations of an independent evaluation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) conducted between September, 2019 and February, 2020.

Evaluation Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the OVO's effectiveness, the efficiency of OVO operations, and the relevance of the OVO mandate. This was the first evaluation conducted of the OVO since its creation in 2007. The scope included all activity areas of the OVO from 2014-2015 to 2019-2020. In addition, the evaluation looked back to the start of the OVO in 2007 to examine the ongoing relevance of the original mandate, roles and responsibilities.

Evaluation Methodology

The methodology included multiple secondary and primary data collection methods to triangulate data. This entailed a comprehensive review of documents and performance data, including client feedback surveys conducted by the OVO and a separate study conducted by VAC; interviews with key informants from the OVO (n=8), Veterans Affairs Canada (n=4), Veterans (n=8) and other stakeholders (n=2), for a total of 22; case studies of two recent individual complaints and one systemic review; and, a comparative assessment with other ombudsman offices at the federal and provincial levels.

Mandate and Role of the OVO

The OVO's mandate is to ensure that Canada's Veterans, serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), their families, and other clients of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) are treated fairly and respectfully, in accordance with the *Veterans Bill of Rights*; and, that Veterans and other clients receive the services and benefits that they require in a fair, timely, and efficient manner. The OVO works in four key areas to: (1) assist and inform Veterans and facilitate referrals; (2) investigate complaints from those who believe they have been treated unfairly; (3) conduct systemic investigations to address issues facing Veterans; and, (4) provide advice to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Parliamentary Committees on Veterans' issues.

The OVO's role is limited to reviewing complaints/cases related to *Veterans Health Care Regulations* and to the *Veterans Well-Being Act part 1,2 and 3.1*. The OVO cannot review individual decisions of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB) or any complaints in regard to a decision on a program that would have a recourse to VRAB, and for all other areas, it can usually only intervene once complainants have exhausted all of VAC review mechanisms, except in compelling circumstances.

The Ombudsman reports directly to the Minister of VAC yet operates independently and at arms-length from the department. Over the last five years, the average expenditures of the OVO have been approximately \$3.3 million per year.

Conclusions

Based on evidence from the documentation, interviews, comparative assessment and cases studies, the evaluation concluded the following:

Effectiveness

The OVO has been effective by providing information/referrals; resolving complaints within its mandate; and treating Veterans fairly and respectfully. However, some Veterans/clients are concerned with the timeliness and level of communication regarding their complaints. As well, more could be done to increase Veterans'/clients' awareness of the OVO and of its role.

The OVO, with support from stakeholders, has had a significant impact through systemic investigations and advice to Parliamentarians that have improved benefits and fair outcomes for thousands of Veterans and other clients. This is seen as a central role for the OVO. While the overall impact of individual complaints is small compared to systemic investigations, the outcome for the Veterans/clients can be significant.

Efficiency

The OVO made process improvements and these are ongoing to enhance efficiency in operations, particularly in relation to providing timely responses to Veterans' complaints and in reducing its turnaround times. The OVO's governance structure is clear and stable, and the performance framework has been updated and is robust. The OVO could gain further efficiencies through continued staff training and specialization, by expediting simple complaints, and with enhanced abilities for the OVO to mediate.

Based on the input from federal Ombuds offices and others in VAC and the OVO, greater efficiencies may also result by integrating federal Ombuds offices (e.g., either in a limited fashion by merging the OVO with the DND Ombuds office, or in a more comprehensive fashion by grouping all federal Ombuds offices into one entity with specialized sections). However, it was out of the scope of this evaluation to examine this in depth and further study would be needed to assess the cost-benefit of such a proposition.

Relevance

There is an ongoing need for the OVO to meet the needs and expectations of Veterans despite the OVO's limited mandate. Veterans generally believe the mandate is broader than it actually is, as the OVO's mandate restricts where it can act to address Veterans' complaints. This contributes to perceptions that undermine the OVO's credibility in terms of the ability to address Veterans' individual complaints. Most stakeholders (e.g., interviews with Veterans), the comparative study, and the Venice Principles supported two areas of change to the OVO mandate to ensure it can act, and is perceived as acting, in the best interest of Veterans, including: (1) greater independence (e.g., reporting to Parliament, legislated mandate), and (2) enhanced powers (e.g., power to compel evidence, as well to power to mediate/undertake alternative dispute resolution). The evaluation also concluded that the review/appeal system for Veterans is complex, with multiple organizations involved and many levels to navigate.

Recommendations *(supporting rationale provided in Section 4.2)*

1. It is recommended that Veterans Affairs Canada conduct an assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of VAC's review/appeal and complaint resolution streams and processes.
2. In considering the evolution of the OVO as VAC services continue to improve and address Veterans' needs, it is recommended that the OVO routinely, through strategic planning, review and ensure its resources are applied to efforts that can have the greatest impact in ensuring fair outcomes for Veterans/clients.
3. It is recommended that the OVO optimize its outreach and engagement to continue to enhance its effectiveness in engaging key audiences and to increase awareness about the Office and what it can (and cannot) do for its clients.
4. It is recommended that the OVO continue to improve its client service approach for individual complaints by:
 - a. Continuing to improve on providing timely and clear (written) responses to complaints;
 - b. Ensuring training so that frontline staff members have knowledge of current issues and Veterans' experiences; and
 - c. Assessing the need for staff specialization.

1.0 Background

This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO).

1.1 Mission, Mandate and Role

The mission of the OVO is to be an agent of positive change to advance fair outcomes for Veterans and their families. The mandate of the OVO is set out in the Order in Council P.C. 2007-530. The OVO works to ensure that Canada's Veterans, serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), their families, and other clients of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) are treated in accordance with the [Veterans Bill of Rights](#), and receive the services and benefits that they require in a fair, timely, respectful and efficient manner. As shown in the OVO's fairness triangle¹, the OVO aims to provide a fair process, a fair treatment and a fair outcome to Veterans/clients and their families.



The core responsibility of the Veterans Ombudsman is to provide an independent and impartial review of complaints and issues related to programs and services delivered by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio and uphold the Veterans Bill of Rights (*Source: Departmental Results Framework*).

The OVO fulfils its mandate by:¹

1. **Assisting and informing** those who contact the OVO, by providing necessary information and facilitating referrals to service providers who can best help them;
2. **Investigating complaints** from those who believe they have been treated unfairly by VAC or other service providers;
3. **Conducting systemic investigations** leading to recommendations to address systemic issues than can potentially affect many other Veterans and their families;
4. **Providing advice** to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Parliamentary Committees on issues of importance to Veterans and their families.

The OVO, by mandate, cannot do the following:

- Review Veterans Affairs decisions that can be reviewed or appealed to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB). It should be noted that the VRAB provides an independent appeal process if Veterans are not satisfied with a decision made by VAC under the *Pension Act*

¹ OVO, Presentation by Craig Dalton to the National Association of Federal Retirees. Dec. 13, 2019.

jurisdiction and part 3 of the *Veterans Well Being Act*. The Board also provides the final level of appeal for War Veterans Allowance claims.

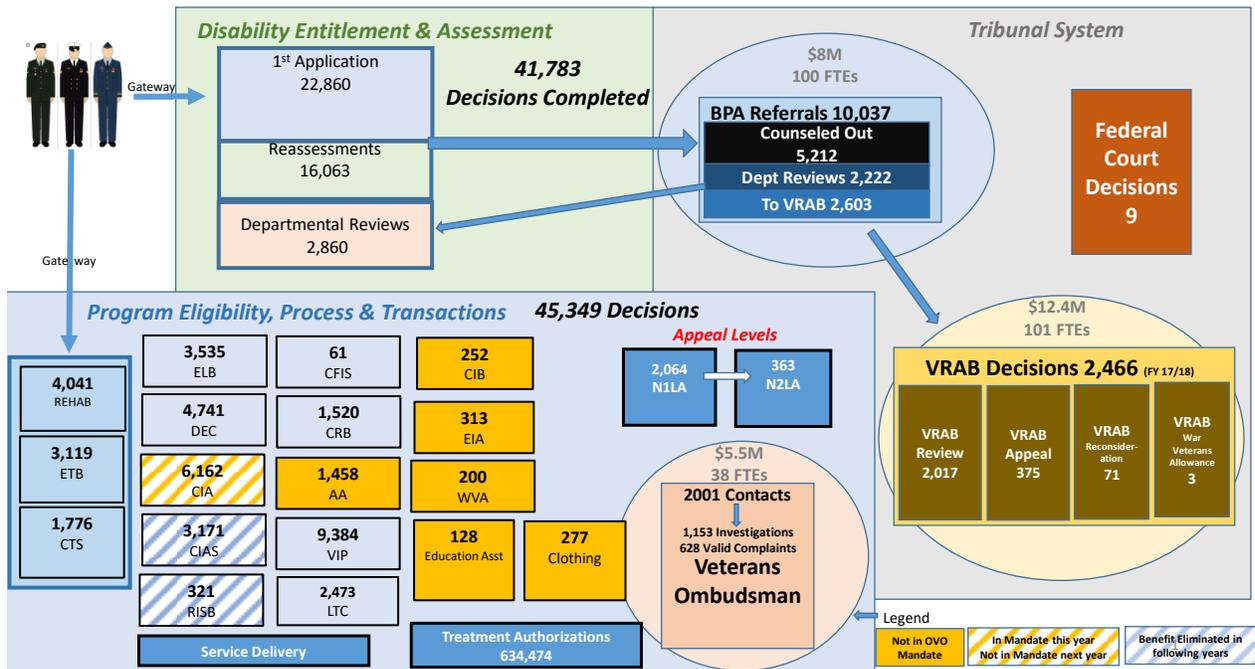
- Review legal advice, court decisions and the decisions of a judge.
- Review matters in the exclusive jurisdiction of the RCMP.
- Review matters that are confidence of the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada.

It should also be noted that the OVO’s role is limited to addressing Veterans’ complaints on only those decisions made both outside the jurisdiction of VRAB and after departmental review. Furthermore, the OVO has a mandate to review a limited number of VAC decisions related to:

- Services under the *Veterans Health Care Regulations*, e.g., Health Care Benefits, Veterans Independence Program, Long Term Care (note the role and extent of action is partial under these regulations); and
- Services under the *Veterans Well-Being Act*, e.g. Education and Training Benefits, Career Transition Services, Rehabilitation Services (but not Disability Awards), Income Replacement Benefits, which include Career Progression Factor and Diminished Earning Capacity Determination, Caregiver Recognition Benefits and Canadian Forces Income Support Benefits.

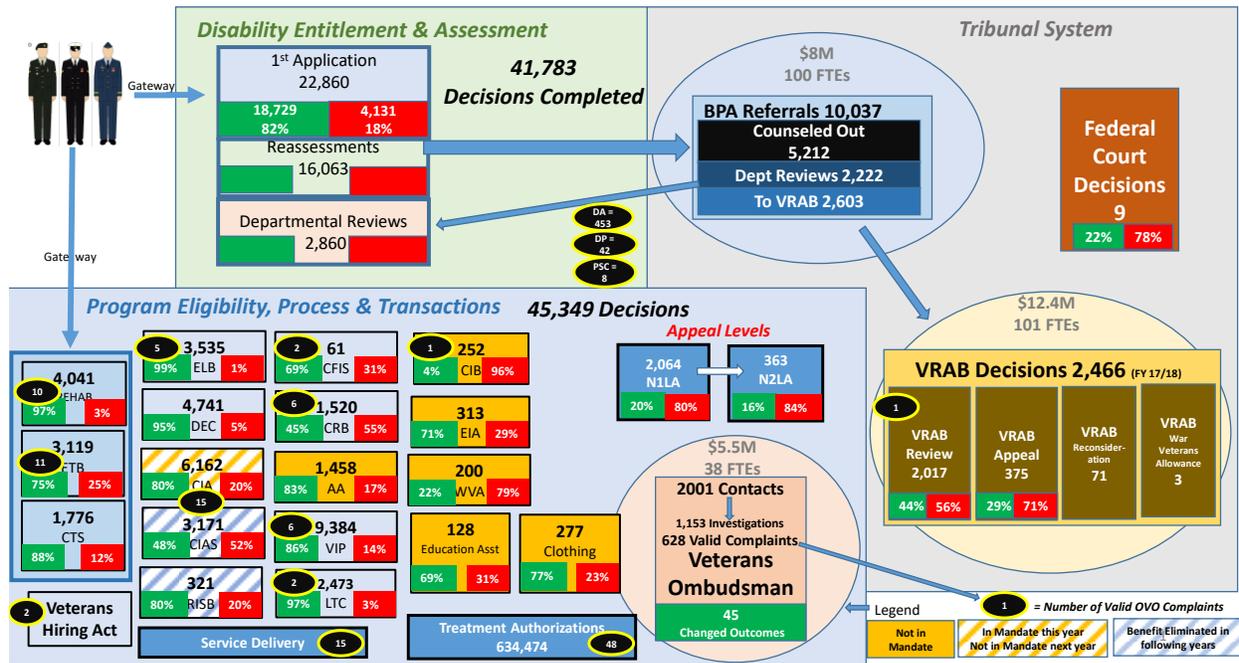
Accordingly, the limitations contained in the mandate have a direct effect on the volume and types of complaints that the OVO can investigate. The following chart provides an indication of the potential number of decisions that could result in a complaint.

Diagram 1: Areas Where Decisions are Made and Transactions Occur (2018-19)



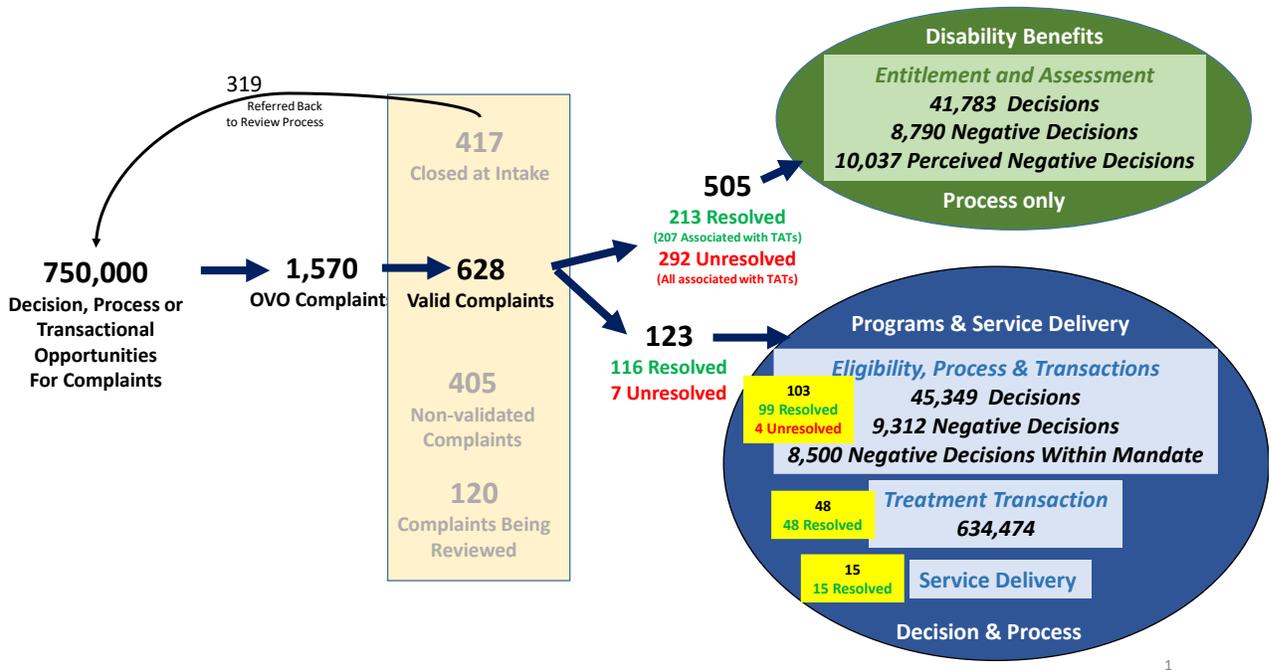
When the approval rates for decisions are taken into consideration (positive decisions don't generally generate a complaint) and the OVO's valid complaints are shown, the OVO has limited influence when the total potential for complaints is considered. The following chart illustrates this and shows that in 2018/19, the OVO's investigations and recommendations resulted in changed outcomes for 45 Veterans, approximately 7% of the valid complaints.

Diagram 2: OVO Valid Complaints (2018-19)



Even if the complaint is valid the following chart shows that the OVO has not been able to resolve every case. Resolve doesn't necessarily mean that a decision was changed. It can mean that time and circumstances have evolved to the point that the complaint no longer requires OVO intervention or that the OVO has explained the situation to Veteran in a manner that the Veteran no longer has a complaint.

Diagram 3: Actual Number of Complaints Received by OVO (2018-19)



1.2 Target Populations

The OVO investigates individual complaints from:

- Veterans of Second World War and the Korean War;
- Veterans (Regular and Reserve) forces and serving members of the CAF;
- Veterans and serving members of the RCMP; and
- Clients: Immediate family members and caregivers of above-mentioned groups and survivors of Veterans.

1.3 Governance

The Ombudsman reports directly to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, but the OVO operates independently and at arms-length from VAC. Direct support is provided to the Ombudsman and the OVO from the Deputy Ombudsman and the Legal Advisor. The key organizational areas in the OVO include:

- Strategic Review and Analysis;
- Intervention Unit;
- Communications Operations; and
- Corporate Services.

Coordination within the OVO is facilitated by:

- Strategic (Strategic Committee) meetings monthly (with situational awareness summaries at each meeting); and
- Operational (Operational Committee) team meetings weekly.

The working relationship between the OVO and VAC is defined through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Service Level Agreements (SLAs), and is operationalized through a set of regular meetings:

- The Ombudsman meets with the Deputy Minister on a monthly basis;
- The Ombudsman and Deputy Ombudsman meets with VAC's Deputy Minister and Assistant Deputy Ministers (ADMs) individually on a monthly;
- The Ombudsman and Deputy Ombudsman hold a quarterly meeting with VAC Senior Management (DM, Associate and ADMs); and
- The Director Corporate Services and Charlottetown Operations can meet with Director Generals (DGs) quarterly, as needed.

The Veterans Ombudsman has established an advisory body, as allowed for in the Order in Council. The Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council (VOAC) provides advice to the Veterans Ombudsman on issues related to his/her mandate; and, assists in promoting the well-being of all Veterans and their families by identifying emerging issues of importance to the Veterans' community and by providing advice to the Ombudsman on how to best approach those issues. The Council is comprised of individuals that represent a broad range of views and experience from the Veterans community, as well as from related professional areas (e.g., research and health care). The Council meets at least once per year to provide advice. The selection of members and terms for membership on the Council are determined by the Ombudsman and publicly available.

1.4 Resources

When established in 2007, the OVO and VAC were allocated the following resources for 2008-09 and ongoing. This included 10 full time equivalents (FTEs) for VAC² and 30 FTEs for the OVO, as well as corporate services to be provided by VAC (Information Technology/Information Management, Human Resources, Finance, Audit & Evaluation):

Table 1: Original 2007 allocations to establish the OVO

Item	2008/2009 ongoing ³
Salary	\$3,458,000
O&M	\$1,700,860
Total	\$5,158,860

² Primarily for VAC to do research and develop responses to OVO requests.

³ Does not include \$691,600 in Employee Benefits Program and \$449,540 for PWGSC (Accommodations).

As of March 2019, expenditures (as per OVO financial statements) by functional area for the last five years are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: OVO Expenditures 2014/2015 to 2018/2019					
	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
Salary	\$2,622,266	\$2,701,840	\$2,533,894	\$2,770,321	\$2,791,738
O&M	\$526,125	\$627,181	\$699,047	\$572,344	\$492,265
Total	\$3,148,391	\$3,329,021	\$3,232,941	\$3,342,665	\$3,284,003

1.5 Stakeholders

The OVO has many external stakeholders that provide input into the OVO's work, including third-party service providers (e.g. numerous large and small Veterans' organizations such as the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL), RCMP Veterans' Association, National Council of Veterans Associations in Canada, VETS Canada, NATO Veterans Organization of Canada, Afghanistan Veterans Association of Canada, etc.). Other stakeholders include research institutions (e.g. the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research - CIMVHR), and the Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council (VOAC). The OVO also participates as an observer on Ministerial Advisory Groups and makes presentations to Parliamentary Committees.

1.6 Expected Results

The OVO's vision, as stated in the 2017-2019 Integrated Business Plan is "to be a centre of excellence in the use of ombudsman best practices that advances the fair treatment of Veterans and their families".

For the OVO, 'fairness for all' of its Veterans is the key goal which can be viewed through the lenses of the fairness triangle (see Section 1.1): fair process, fair treatment and fair outcome.

The stated outcomes and performance indicators for the OVO, based on the VAC Departmental Results Framework (DRF) are listed below:

Table 3: 2019/2020 OVO Program Outcomes and Indicators

Outcome 1 (Ultimate): Veterans and their families have access to a timely review of complaints about the programs, services and support delivered by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio

- % of complaints closed within 60 working days (Target Date: Mar. 31, 2020. Target: 75%)

Outcome 2: Issues about the programs, services and support provided to Veterans and their families by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio are identified and addressed

- % of OVO recommendations on emerging and systemic issues implemented by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio (Target Date: Mar. 31, 2021. Target: 70%)

In the summer of 2019, the OVO updated its performance information which included updating the DRF and the OVO Performance Information Profile (PIP), along with a new logic model. The logic model located in Annex 1 provides an updated overview of the activities, outputs and expected outcomes for the OVO. Based on these updates, the 2020/2021 DRF has been amended with the following expected outcomes and indicators (changes noted in **bold**):

Table 4: 2020/2021 OVO Program Outcomes and Indicators

Outcome 1 (Ultimate): Veterans and their families have access to a timely review of complaints about the programs, services and support delivered by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio

- % of complaints closed within 60 working days (Target Date: Mar. 31,2021. Target: 75%)

Outcome 2: Issues about the programs, services and support provided to Veterans and their families by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio are identified **for resolution**.

- **% of OVO recommendations related to individual complaints implemented by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio** (Target Date: Mar. 31/2021. Target: 100%)
- **% of OVO recommendations related to systemic issues which Veterans Affairs Portfolio seeks resolution (Target Date: Mar. 31,2021. Target: 85%)**

2.0 Evaluation Purpose, Issues and Methodology

2.1 Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of OVO operations. This was the first evaluation conducted of the OVO since its creation in 2007.⁴ This evaluation followed an Evaluability Assessment completed April 25, 2019.

The scope of the evaluation was all activity areas of the OVO and on the last 5 years of OVO operations (FY 2014/2015 to 2019/2020). However, for the relevancy/mandate component, the evaluation looked back to establishment of the OVO in 2007, to understand why the office was established, its original mandate, roles and responsibilities; and then, examine whether they remain relevant in meeting the current needs of Veterans/clients.

⁴ An evaluation was originally to be conducted by April 2012 or five years after the office was fully operational but this did not occur.

2.2 Evaluation Issues and Questions

The issues and questions used to guide the evaluation included:

Effectiveness

1. Are Veterans complaints being resolved, and what are the key barriers in the OVO's ability to resolve complaints?
2. What impact/change is resulting from systemic research report recommendations?
3. What additional or unexpected outcomes (positive or negative) have resulted due to the work of the OVO?

Efficiency

4. Is the OVO Performance Strategy adequate to measure its impact?
5. Is the governance structure in the OVO appropriate and efficient for achieving expected outcomes?
6. Considering other ombudsman offices, are there alternative structures or delivery options (e.g., powers, tools) that would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the OVO?
7. Have the activities of the OVO been delivered in an efficient and economical manner?

Relevance / Mandate

8. What are the needs and expectations of Veterans/clients for an Ombudsman?
9. Is the OVO's mandate still relevant considering the current context and Veterans'/clients' needs?
10. Is there an appropriate level of independence for the OVO?

2.3 Methodology

To address the evaluation issues/questions and triangulate the data collected, a mixed-method approach was used. The methodology included: key informant interviews, a review of documents and databases, two case studies of individual complaints and one systemic review, as well as a comparative assessment with other ombudsman offices (federal and Ontario). A matrix that summarizes the evaluation questions, indicators and methods used to conduct the evaluation can be found in Annex 2.

The focus of the document review was on mandate documents, annual plans and reports, performance data from the OVO's database (Ombudsman File Tracking System-OFTS), OVO Client Surveys (2018-19 and first half of 2019-20) and the results of client surveys conducted by VAC between 2014/2015 and 2019/2020. The document review covered the whole system that Veterans can access, including: the distinct mandates of all relevant organizations and levels of appeal (e.g., OVO, VAC, VRAB, Bureau of Pensions Advocate (BPA), National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman); their relevance to Veterans; and, areas of gaps and complementarity. The case studies of two individual cases and one of a recent systemic report can be found in Annex 3. The documents and databases reviewed are listed in Annex 4.

Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with 22 individuals from the following categories (the interview guides are located in Annex 5):

- Management and staff in the OVO (6 interviews with 8 individuals);
- Key senior officials in VAC who are engaged with the OVO (4);
- Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council members, Veterans, and organizations helping Veterans (9);
- Parliamentary Veterans Sub-Committee Chair (1).

Responses from key informants are reported in the findings as follows:

- A few: less than 25 percent
- Some: between 25-49 percent
- Majority: between 50-79 percent
- Most: over 80 percent
- All: 100 percent

The evaluation included two case studies of individual claims to provide the opportunity to examine particular *effectiveness* or *efficiency* issues in a more in-depth manner, to learn lessons and highlight best practices. It also examined a systemic review “*Meeting Expectations: Timely and Transparent Decisions for Canada’s Ill and Injured Veterans*” to show how the recommendations influence change.

The comparative assessment⁵ with other ombudsman offices was included to answer questions around relevance, particularly relating to alternatives in mandate, independence and powers of the office, governance and management structure, human and financial resources, etc. The assessment also examined how other ombudsman offices measure their performance, as well as the international standards for Ombuds offices. The comparison reviewed the practices of the Federal Taxpayers’ and Ontario’s Ombudsmen in detail, and compiled insights from four other Federal Ombuds offices (National Defence, Victims of Crime, Procurement, and Responsible Enterprise). As part of the comparative assessment, the evaluation team reviewed the Principles on the Protection and Promotion of the Ombudsman Institution (“Venice Principles”), adopted by the Venice Commission on March 15, 2019.⁶ The 25 Venice Principles represent the first, independent, international set of standards for the Ombudsman institution. They provide guidelines for the improvement of existing and new Ombudsman offices.⁷

⁵ Separate working document.

⁶ The Venice Commission is the Council of Europe’s Commission for Democracy through Law providing legal advice to its Member States.

⁷ International Ombudsman Institute: <https://www.theioi.org/ioi-news/current-news/venice-principles-on-ombudsman-institutions-now-also-available-in-italian>

2.4 Limitations

The evaluation relied on documents and performance data provided by the OVO, and did not independently verify this information. This limitation had minimal impact on the evaluation process as all stakeholders agreed that the OVO's data was accurate and reliable, and most was publicly reported.

The evaluation interviewed a limited number of key informants (n=22) due to timeframe and resources available. This limitation had minimal impact on the evaluation as representatives from all key stakeholder groups were interviewed, and interviews with Veterans and Veteran stakeholder groups accounted for half of all interviews conducted allowing for the triangulation of the data.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Effectiveness

The evaluation assessed the effectiveness of the OVO based on its own performance indicators such as responding to and resolving Veterans complaints, providing fair and respectful treatment, and engaging with Veterans. It also examined the impact of its key recommendations.

3.1.1 Resolving Veterans/Clients Complaints

Finding 1: Overall, the OVO has been successful in addressing most inquiries and complaints within its mandate. Its performance in addressing/closing complaints within sixty days significantly improved over the last five years. The limits of authority within which the OVO can address Veterans' issues is the key barrier to its overall effectiveness.

The degree to which the OVO was effective in resolving Veterans' complaints is noted below against each of the OVO's key roles (addressing individual inquiries and complaints; conducting systemic investigations; providing advice to the Minister and Parliamentarians).

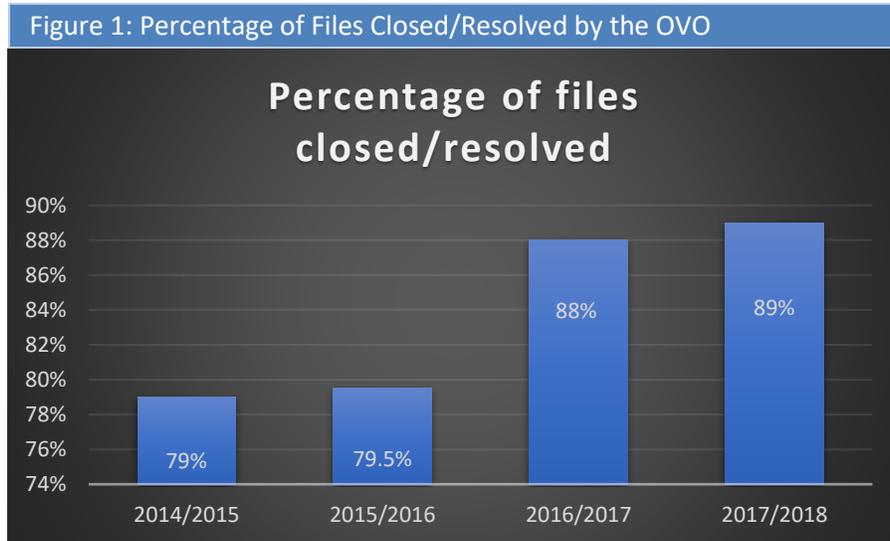
Individual Inquiries and Complaints

The review of documents confirmed that Veteran/client issues brought to the OVO's attention over the period under review were varied. They included disability awards/pensions, medical treatment allowances/rehabilitation and vocational assistance, VRAB decisions, Bureau of Pension Advocates (BPA) service delivery, and the complexity and turnaround time related to VAC's benefits and application processes. Of these, disability issues and VAC turnaround time for a decision on a disability benefit application accounted for the majority of cases. For example, the OVO 2018/2019 Annual Report noted that 50 percent of enquiries/complaints concerned disability issues, with 79 percent associated with turnaround time. As well, OVO respondents noted that virtually all unresolved files over the last 5 years were due to disability award turnaround time (which the OVO does not have the authority to address unless there are compelling circumstances). The OVO noted that in the last 6 months (2019-2020), of the 300 valid complaints, 270 (90%) were about turnaround time.

A review of Departmental Performance Reports, which included OVO performance indicators, showed that the percent of issues raised by Veterans and other individuals that were being addressed by the OVO was an average of 83.5 percent between FY 2014/2015 and 2017/2018, 3.5 percent above the 80 percent performance target. Figure 1 below provides a breakdown of files opened⁸ and addressed/closed by fiscal year during that period. This includes a significant number of referrals to the authorities best positioned to handle the issues raised by Veterans/clients.

⁸ The OVO indicates that a file is opened for every information request, referral and intervention. Multiple files can be opened for a single client to address either an information request, a referral or an intervention given that a Veteran can be faced with more than one issue or condition.

Figure 1 also shows that the OVO made significant progress in FY 2016/17 and 2017/2018 in resolving cases, with an increase of 10 percent between 2014/2015 and 2017/2018. OVO reports and internal respondents noted that changes made to the case management system have improved how the OVO tracks files and analyzes data. Improvements in efficiency are discussed in more details in Section 3.3.



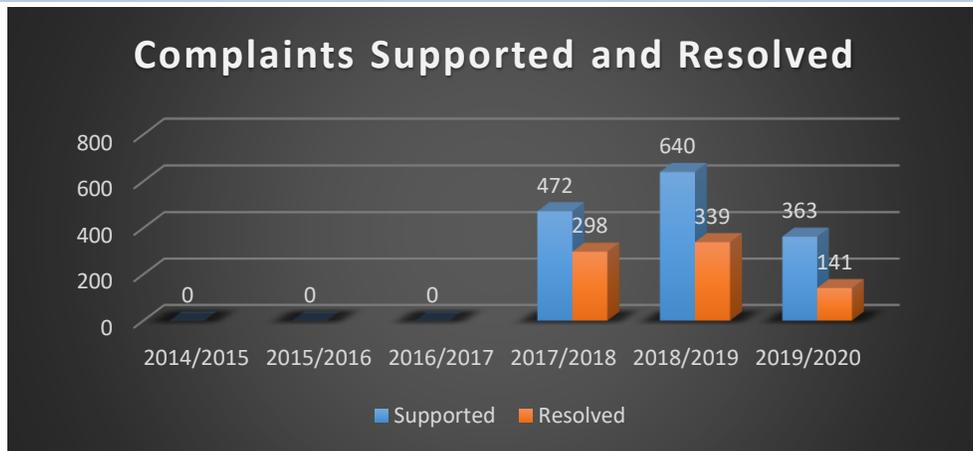
Source: Ombudsman File Tracking System (OFTS)

As Figure 2 shows, the number of complaints handled each year varies. This is due to a number of issues and changes that occur over time (e.g., clients getting results through the VAC appeal process; tracking methods for dating unresolved files, etc.) Available data showed that for FY 2017/2018,⁹ the OVO assessed 472 complaints within its jurisdiction to have an unfairness component, with 298 (63%) resolved in favour of the Veteran/client. In 2018/2019, it investigated 640 with an unfairness component and 339 (53%) were resolved in favour of the complainant. In FY 2019/2020 (incomplete), the OVO investigated 504 complaints, with 363 having an unfairness element and 141 (39%) were resolved.

Overall, the unresolved complaints were related to the turnaround time for the adjudication of Disability Benefits (outside of OVO mandate). VAC is dealing with a substantive backlog in this area.

⁹ Data for previous years were not readily available.

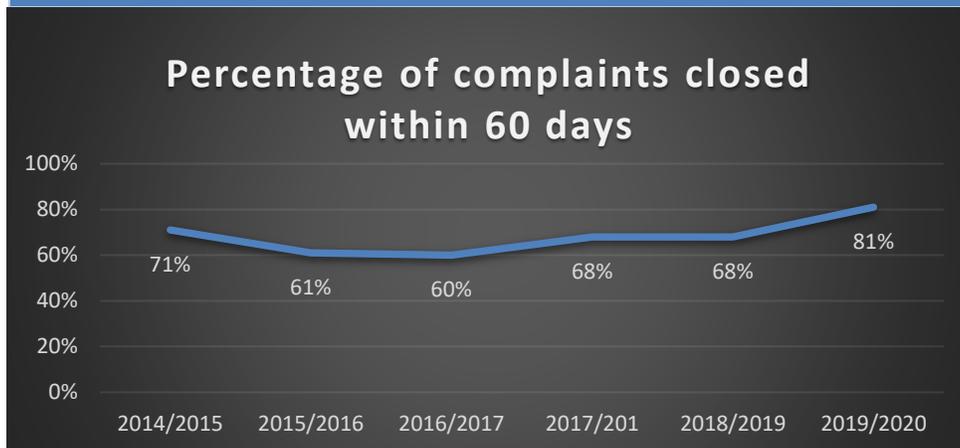
Figure 2: Number of Complaints Supported and Resolved by the OVO



Source: OVO OFTS

As to the number of complaints addressed within the 60 working day service standard (performance target: 75%), the data showed a lot of variation during the period under review, with an overall improvement of 10 percent between 2014/2015 and 2019/2020. As Figure 3 shows, there was an overall increase from 71 percent to 81 percent (exceeding the target in 2019-20)¹⁰. However, performance decreased from 2015/2016 to 2018/2019, with variations from 60 to 68 percent, significantly lower than expectations.

Figure 3: Percentage of Complaints Closed within 60 Days



Source: OVO OFTS

The Veterans interviewed indicated that the OVO is partially helpful in addressing their complaints due to the limited mandate (some believing that the OVO is effective and others not). The sample was too small to draw conclusions on the different perspectives expressed but those who were in contact with the OVO through consultative or Parliamentary Committees, for example, had a more

¹⁰ The 81% is only reflecting the turnaround time of the files that were closed and may be different at the end of the year.

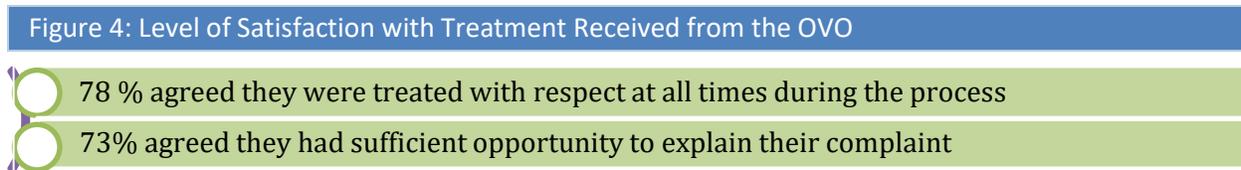
positive opinion on the effectiveness of the OVO. Several Veterans noted that the OVO was their last resort after a long and frustrating appeal process.

Case studies confirmed the findings noted above and showed that individual complaints have become increasingly complex in recent years with the review process within the OVO requiring lengthy back and forth with VAC to obtain and analyse information.

Other than the limited mandate of the OVO in terms of what it can address to help Veterans/clients, the evaluation did not find other significant barriers that affected its effectiveness. Research reports noted a variety of barriers related to VAC programs and services, leading to recommendations from the OVO to VAC, but these were not barriers that specifically prevented the OVO from achieving its outcomes.

Finding 2: While the OVO treats Veterans/clients with respect in handling their complaints, the OVO could be timelier and more transparent in its communication with Veterans.

When considering how Veterans are treated by the OVO, information was available from client feedback gathered by the OVO and from the interviews conducted with Veterans and VAC. Veterans, VAC and external stakeholders interviewed all agreed that the OVO treats Veterans/clients respectfully and fairly. This was consistent with client feedback surveys conducted by the OVO in 2018-19 and 2019-20, which showed that the vast majority were satisfied with the treatment they received from the OVO. According to OVO client feedback data (summary of data from 2018-19 and first half of 2019-20):



However, a few of the Veterans interviewed and client feedback collected by the OVO indicated that the Office could be more transparent and timelier in responding to Veterans/clients' enquiries regarding their complaint. For instance, surveys conducted by the OVO with clients from 2018-19 and first half of 2019-20 indicated that only 58 percent felt they were provided with clear information of the steps following their call, 54 percent felt that the OVO response to their complaint was clear, and only 41 percent agreed that they received a response when indicated. Some Veterans interviewed for this evaluation also mentioned that they would prefer to receive a letter from the OVO summarizing their case.

The Veterans who raised concerns when interviewed noted that despite repeated calls or letters to the OVO, months could go by before they got an answer to their enquiry regarding their claim. The key cause of these delays was thought to be a lack of staff resources to handle the caseloads. Nonetheless, for these Veterans, these delays added to the frustration they felt as a result of the lengthy VAC appeal process. According to OVO respondents, those delays were due in large part to a backlog caused by some inefficiencies, staff turnover and difficulty in recruiting staff in

Charlottetown. The documentation reviewed and interviews showed that the OVO has taken steps to reduce this backlog (see Section 3.3 on Efficiency).

Systemic Investigations

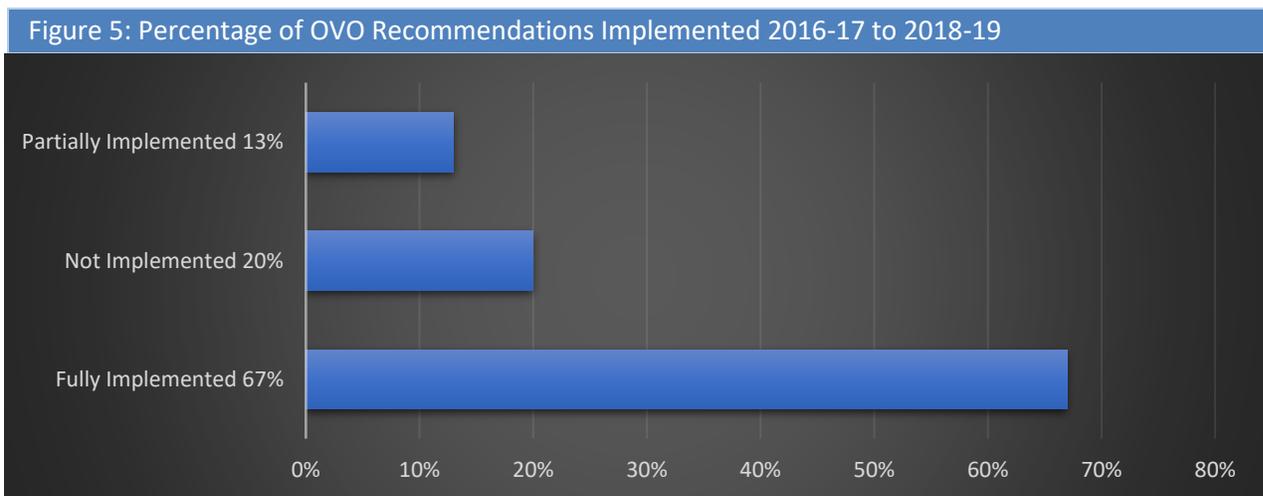
Finding 3: Most of the OVO’s recommendations to VAC made through systemic investigations have been implemented or partially implemented.

The review of documents indicates that the OVO has published from two to four studies/systemic investigations annually. Topics have included, for example, health care/ impairment allowances, Veterans’ rights to know reasons for decisions, fair compensation for pain and suffering, fair treatment for Veterans and their families in transition, disability benefits, fair adjudication, and continuum of care.

VAC and OVO key informants noted that the OVO has the freedom to determine which topics it investigated. They noted that topics for investigations came from various sources but that they are mostly based on complaints and/or Veterans’ input. Several key internal stakeholders noted that the OVO has taken a strategic approach to selecting review topics.

The documents showed that the OVO has a good track record in terms of the implementation of recommendations it made to VAC. Reports for 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, before the OVO started to produce report cards on the implementation of its recommendations, indicated that the percentage of recommendations accepted by the department was 91 and 93 percent respectively, much higher than its performance target of 80 percent.

Figure 5 below shows that over three years, between 2016/2017 and 2018/2019, VAC implemented or partially implemented most of the recommendations made by the OVO in systemic investigations, with 67 percent fully implemented and 13 percent partially implemented, for a total of 80 percent (note that there is often a time lag in implementation as it takes time to secure funding, adjust authorities and processes, etc.)



Source: OVO Report Card 2019

Table 5 provides a more detailed overview of the percentage of recommendations fully (FI), partially (PI) or not implemented (NI) by area of recommendation between FY 2016/2017 and 2018/2019, based on the OVO report cards. As the numbers show, VAC has implemented in large part recommendations in areas such as life skills and preparedness, financial security and service delivery (Veteran’s Experience). The OVO has been less successful in seeing VAC implement recommendations in the health care and support area.

Table 5: Recommendations Implemented by Area of Recommendation

Area of Recommendation	# of Rec.	FI	PI	NI
Health Care and Support	10	1	1	8
Veterans Experience with VAC	25	14	7	4
Financially Secure	19	18		1
Life Skills and Preparedness	4	4		
Purpose (e.g., employment or other meaningful purpose)	1	1		
Social Integration	4	4		
Total	63	42	8	13

Source: OVO Report Card 2019

The documents reviewed also showed that the most recurring complaint received by the OVO was VAC’s turnaround time to process claims. The OVO systemic investigation of VAC’s turnaround time published in 2018 (see Case Study 3, Annex 3), found that while VAC met the 16-week service standard for applications from World War II or Korean War service Veterans, the majority of all other disability benefits first decision took longer – sometimes much longer, based on its review of over 1,000 files. The investigation found that this was particularly the case for Francophone and women applicants, and there was a lack of prioritization based on health and financial needs. The OVO also found that Veterans and families experienced a lack of transparency and communication throughout the process in terms of how turnaround times are reported, the status of Veterans applications, or the reasons for delays. It made seven recommendations to VAC. At the time of report writing, the department had implemented three of the seven of the OVO’s recommendations.

The fact that VAC had not implemented all recommendations is due to several factors. Most key informants noted that some recommendations do take more time to be implemented due to the considerable amounts of money involved, and the complexity of implementing some recommendations.

Appearing Before Parliamentary Committees

Another opportunity for the OVO to weigh in on Veterans concerns is when the Ombudsman is asked to appear before parliamentary committees. Annual reports indicate that the Ombudsman, supported by the Deputy Ombudsman, often offers testimony on issues of concern to Veterans and their families, appearing 2 to 3 times, on average, each year. These appearances include before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA); Senate Sub Committee on Veterans Affairs, and, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance (FINA). The

testimony serves the purpose of informing Committees on issues they are exploring on behalf of the government.

3.1.2 Awareness, Outreach and Engagement

Finding 4: Many Veterans/clients are not aware of the OVO or familiar with its role. The OVO's outreach has increased over time, particularly through social media, but more could be done to improve Veterans' awareness of the OVO and its mandate.

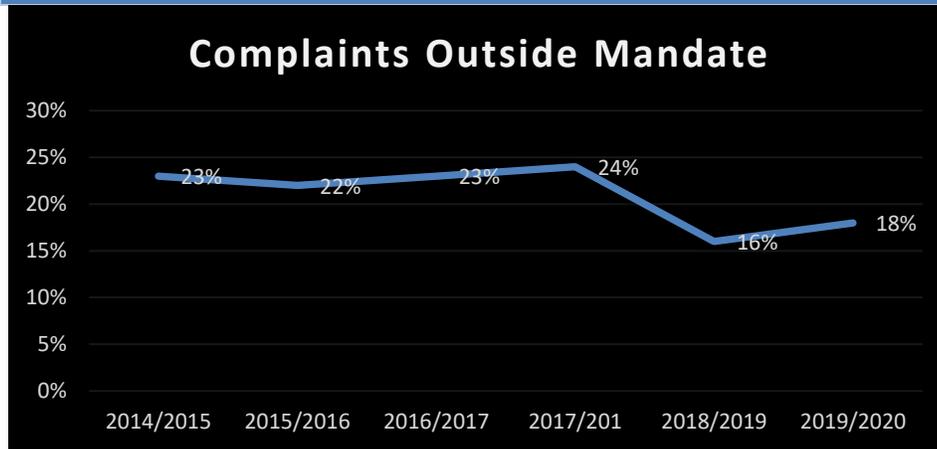
Awareness of the OVO

A national survey that VAC conducted in 2017 revealed that most Veterans and other clients of VAC were not very aware of the OVO, with only 54 percent of survey respondents indicating they 'have heard' of the OVO, broken down by: Veterans (63%); RCMP (59%); Survivors (37%). As well, 93 percent responded that they were 'not very familiar' with the OVO, having only superficial knowledge its role. Based on the OVO database (client feedback), Veterans are more likely to hear about the OVO from the CAF, VAC or the Internet than from Veterans' organizations, friends/family or social media.

This lack of awareness of the existence and role/mandate of the OVO was confirmed by key informants. Most interviewees thought that the majority of Veterans were not aware or fully aware of what the OVO can/cannot do. Most Veterans interviewed thought that many Veterans do not know about the OVO; as well, some of them noted Veterans may not be accessing the OVO due to a lack of trust in its effectiveness or simply from being exhausted or discouraged after having gone through a lengthy process with VAC.

A potential indicator of the level of awareness of Veterans with the OVO's role is the percentage of complaints received that are outside the mandate of the OVO. The statistics compiled by the OVO show that an average of 21 percent of complaints received have been outside of mandate over the last 6 years. However, this level has decreased recently. As Figure 6 shows, there was a 5 percent decline in complaints outside of the OVO's mandate between 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, from 23 percent to 18 percent.

Figure 6: Percentage of Complaints Outside the OVO's Mandate



Source: OFTS

Overall, most interviewees thought that the OVO should do more outreach to inform Veterans and make the existence and role of the OVO more explicit. It was suggested that this be done through the OVO and/or VAC websites and by participating in events organized by Veterans organizations. One suggestion was to include summary information about the OVO and its phone number / website on all VAC correspondence with Veterans.

Outreach and Engagement

With regards to outreach and engagement, OVO documents show a three-fold increase in the number of calls made to the OVO from 2014/2015 to 2017/2018 (the number of emails remained constant with an annual average of 1,336). During the same period, the number of complaints made online through the complaint form increased from 146 to 655 (note increases are usually seen after VAC program/benefit changes).

While the OVO maintained its presence via the traditional media (interviews, press releases, etc.), and the number of town hall and stakeholder meetings (e.g. with official Veterans organizations) remained relatively constant over the years, there was a significant increase in the use of social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and Blog posts, followers, etc.) to reach and communicate with Veterans/clients. A review of annual reports shows that Tweets increased from 568 to 2,600 and Facebook followers increased 2,143 in 2014/2015 to 5,100 in 2017/2018. In the last two years, the OVO conducted two live Facebook events and reported that one of these events on Pension for Life reached over 19,000 people. At the same time, the number of visitors to the OVO website was approximately 35,500 on average in the last two years.

Veterans expressed mixed views on whether they are engaged appropriately. Most of those interviewed mentioned that they follow the OVO on social media and read its reports. Some argued that traditional means of reaching out to Veterans such as town halls were no longer as effective since Veterans are spread out across the country and often live away from major centres, while others noted that the town halls had value and were well attended. A few noted that the OVO could

have a presence at Veterans’ rallies, which are well attended, to enhance outreach; and, others noted the value of social media outreach.

A few Veterans also questioned the relevance of Veteran service organizations to represent their interests (e.g., in stakeholder meetings) and felt that some organizations may be in conflict of interest as VAC service providers. As such, these Veterans thought that the OVO should engage consult/engage directly with the Veterans and their families (not via Veterans organizations). While it was recognized that there are many Veterans’ groups all with different objectives, a few Veterans noted that the ‘modern’ groups need to be included in consultations as they better represent the interests of the wounded.

What is clear from the data is that Veterans are increasingly using social media to interact with and get information from the OVO. The sample of interviewees was too small to draw conclusions on the continued effectiveness or relevance of town halls and stakeholder meetings but it may be something that the OVO wishes to explore in more depth in the future.

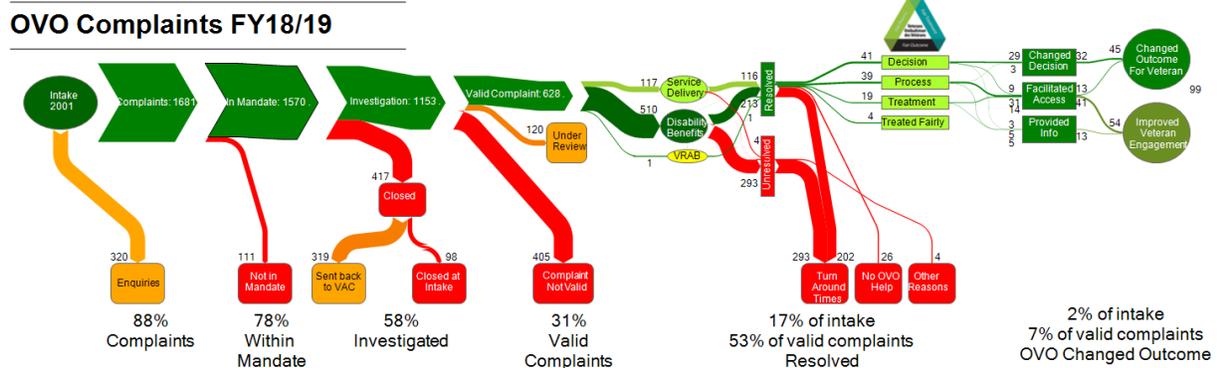
3.1.3 Impact of the OVO

Finding 5: OVO systemic investigations and advice to Parliamentarians have resulted in positive impacts for a large number of Veterans. However, few individual cases addressed by the OVO have led to a change in outcomes for Veterans. In spite of this, the impact of these changes for the individuals concerned can be significant.

Individual Complaint Investigations

Several OVO respondents noted that the percent of individual complaints leading to a reversal of a decision is in fact quite low. Data compiled by the OVO on individual reversals in VAC’s decisions from individual complaints show that it is indeed small. For instance, data for 2018/2019 (see chart) shows that 4 percent of OVO individual complaint investigations resulted in a changed outcome (based on total complaints investigated).

Diagram 4: OVO Complaints 2018-19



However, the impact of the OVO can be significant for those individual complaints that they are able to address. For example, in one 2019 report, the OVO remarked that providing a \$150 railing

to allow a Veteran to safely move from one part of his house to another may not seem a big deal but it is for the individual. Other individual outcomes found in various reports included:

- \$324,000 + lifetime financial support provided to a dependent adult child;
- Life changing dental care;
- Dying Veteran receives end of life support;
- Funding restored to 90+ year old Veteran; and
- 97-year-old Veteran provided with housekeeping and family support that kept him in his home.

The case studies (see Annex 3) illustrated the type of outcomes that can make significant differences in a Veteran's life. In one case, \$136,000+ was awarded to a Veteran's surviving spouse as a result of the reversal of VAC's decision. The other individual case study showed that the award of a Career Impact Allowance (CIA) as a result of injuries leading to chronic pain can make a real difference for a Veteran's quality of life and financial security.

The Veterans interviewed also considered that providing support to individuals was a key role for the OVO.

Systemic Investigations

The evaluation found that systemic investigations can have far-reaching impacts in terms of the amount of money going into Veterans pockets and in terms of the number of Veterans benefiting from suggested changes. The documentation reviewed provided compelling evidence of this impact and all key informants shared this view.

The documentation showed that, both in Budget 2016 and Budget 2017, the federal government directly addressed several of the OVO's recommendations (although not every aspect of them was addressed), providing nearly \$10 billion to implement OVO and other recommendations, leading to increases in Disability Awards, Earnings Loss Benefits, Caregiver Compensation, and Education and Training Benefits, among others.¹¹

The OVO reports noted that it included increasing the Disability Award to a maximum of \$360,000, and increasing the Earnings Loss Benefit to 90 percent of gross pre-release military salary. The changes also included eliminating the time-limit for spouses and survivors to access vocational rehabilitation, expanding access to the Military Family Resource Centres, improving outreach to families, closing the seam for members transitioning to civilian life, and providing additional

¹¹ https://www.canada.ca/en/veterans-affairs-canada/news/2017/12/government_of_canadaannounceapensionforlifeforveterans.html: "When combined with well-being programs already announced in previous budgets, the Government of Canada's investments since 2016 add up to nearly \$10 billion."
<https://www.budget.gc.ca/2019/docs/plan/chap-04-en.html>: "When combined with previously announced programs that assist with education, employment, caregiver support and physical and mental health, the Government of Canada's investments in veterans' initiatives totals over \$10 billion since 2016."

support directly to the caregivers of ill and injured Veterans through the new Caregiver Recognition Benefit. The Government of Canada characterized this new benefit as a substantive step forward in recognizing that family members who act as caregivers need benefits in their own right given the significant role many play in supporting Veterans.

In 2017/2018, the OVO discovered a miscalculation in the grade levels related to years served for the Career Impact Allowance. The OVO alerted the Department of the error, which was immediately resolved. Correcting this mistake raised the grade level of 134 Veterans, who received an additional \$600 monthly.

The list below provides other examples of the key systemic contributions made by the OVO in recent years to improve the life of Veterans:

- Veterans Homelessness is recognized as an issue;
- \$14 Million in retroactive payments for 600 Veterans;
- \$1 Million in annual payments for 133 Veterans;
- \$10 Million in annual payment for 1,500 Veterans; and
- \$150 Million accounting error affects 100,000+ Veterans, survivors and estates.¹²

Influence Decision Making

Internal key informants noted that OVO advice to Parliamentary Committees was very impactful, pointing out that OVO recommendations have been cited in federal government budgets, Ministerial mandate letters and Parliamentary reports. For example, OVO annual reports note that:

- In September 2014, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance (FINA) emphasized the importance of funding the changes recommended by the OVO in ‘The New Veterans Charter: Moving Forward’;
- The VAC Minister’s mandate letter (2015) reflected several recommendations previously put forward by the OVO, namely reducing complexity and overhauling service delivery, increasing the Earnings Loss Benefit to 90 percent of pre-release salary, expanding access to the Permanent Impairment Allowance (now called the Career Impact Allowance), increasing the value of the Disability Award, and ending the time limit for surviving spouses to apply for vocational rehabilitation and assistance services; and,
- The FINA Study of Bill C-44, ‘An Act to Implement Certain Provisions of the Budget’ was tabled in Parliament on March 22, 2017. The Veterans Ombudsman’s May 19, 2017, brief noted that he was pleased that the Government had taken his recommendations and those of many Veterans’ organizations seriously and in Bill C-44 was moving forward on several of them.

¹² The OVO discovered the error in the spring of 2017 and brought it to VAC’s attention in the summer of 2017. VAC announced publicly a solution in the fall of 2018 and payments to some Veterans commenced in the fall of 2019.

In spite of all the changes noted above, in its 2016-2017 Annual Report, the OVO noted that there still exists unfairness in many areas, including service delivery. It states that “putting in place a simplified and efficient Veteran-centric service-delivery approach will require continued collaboration to ensure that even the most complex cases get the right level of support and that all Veterans are treated fairly.” Based on the interviews conducted as part of this evaluation, this is still an unresolved and central issue from the perspective of the OVO.

3.2 Efficiency

The evaluation assessed whether the OVO performance strategy is adequate, its governance structure appropriate and efficient, as well as if activities were delivered in an efficient and economical manner. The evaluation also examined whether alternative structures or delivery options would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the OVO.

3.2.1 Performance Strategy

Finding 6: The OVO has a robust and updated performance measurement strategy supported by timely and reliable data. Performance indicators used by the OVO are similar to those of other Ombuds offices. Performance information is used by the department and taken seriously, but needs to be clearer to Veterans on what can and cannot be implemented and why.

The OVO reports on its performance both through its annual reports and through the VAC Departmental Results Framework (DRF). It has recently updated its performance measurement framework which included updating the DRF and the OVO Performance Information Profile (PIP), along with a new logic model (see Annex 1). This new performance framework better reflects the intended outcomes of the OVO, has clearer outcome statements, and the new logic model has clear causal links between outcomes and the ultimate outcome. Most of the indicators in the new PIP can be measured accurately and in a timely manner by the OVO through existing systems, though some systems had to be adjusted to collect new data (currently underway). The PIP includes both effectiveness and efficiency indicators.

The OVO’s data system (OFTS) provides comprehensive performance data on complaints (since 2007) and the public ‘Report Card’ assesses the implementation of systemic review recommendations (since 2009). Over the last year, the OVO has also been collecting data on client service experiences on a quarterly basis and has client awareness data from the VAC National Survey conducted every three years.

Internal key informants indicated that the OVO’s performance information is used by the department, reported publicly, and taken seriously. However, some internal and external informants noted that OVO’s public reports and recommendations need to be clearer on what issues can and cannot be addressed by VAC, and why. Informants also said that OVO management could use its data more strategically (and the OVO is now creating dashboards) and most believe

the OVO could promote its role and recommendations more with the public (e.g., via website, by including information on VAC correspondence to Veterans, etc.).

While annual public reporting on performance is common and seen as important for Ombuds institutions, so also is the recognition that measuring success is challenging. Most offices examined in the comparative assessment reported on their performance in annual reports in the same way as the OVO, including:

- Number and type of complaints (and trends over time);
- How complaints are provided (e.g., phone, online);
- Timeliness in addressing complaints;
- Number and type of investigations and % of recommendations accepted /acted upon;
- Outreach and communications statistics; and
- Expenditures against budget.

Other Ombuds offices suggested that success could be also be measured through:

- Stakeholder surveys on level of awareness of office, as well as views on effectiveness, trust, credibility and impartiality of the office (noting that assessing ‘fairness’ is not the same as ‘client satisfaction’) [N.B. the OVO has recently been soliciting client feedback];
- Third party endorsements of recommendations [N.B. the OVO does this sometimes by issuing recommendations jointly with Veterans groups such as the RCL];
- The success of advice/ recommendations to influence policy change; and
- The use of the office by others (e.g., citations, consultations).

3.2.2 Governance Structure

Finding 7: The OVO has a clear and stable governance structure, with clearly defined responsibilities with respect to VAC and the Advisory Council.

Documentation indicated a well-defined governance structure in the OVO (as detailed in Section 1.3), with clearly laid out responsibilities with respect to the department and the VOAC (e.g., updated MOU and SLAs with VAC, Terms of Reference for VOAC). The organizational structure of the OVO has remained fairly constant over time and no issues were noted in terms of its effectiveness.

While the operational environment of the OVO is impacted by changes in VAC programs and by leadership changes in the Ombudsman position (a new Ombudsman was appointed in November 2018), the program areas in the OVO are clear, stable and well-defined. As well, financial allocations have remained relatively stable over time. Integrated business plans have been completed and a strategic plan is now under development with a new Ombudsman.

The OVO has established a new structure for the frontline services to enhance efficiencies and, with this, has plans to also establish a Quality Assurance Manager and Team leads (French & English) to better address workplace issues and improve morale.

While the governance structure is viewed by all internal informants as appropriate, there are some concerns with succession at the management level in the OVO (as there will be a number of managers in key positions retiring around the same time).

3.2.3 Efficiency and Economy of Delivery

Finding 8: Organizational design changes have been made in the OVO to increase frontline efficiency. Workflows and micro-investigations are also being implemented to increase efficiencies. Further plans are being made to enhance training and integrate online tools into the management of complaints. Timeliness to respond to complaints has improved over time and the backlog is being reduced. Further efficiencies may be possible with staff specialization and greater familiarization with Veterans' issues.

Process Efficiencies

The OVO has been working to enhance its efficiencies in a number of ways:

- In 2016/2017, following an Organizational Design Study, the Office launched 'Operation Revitalization' to streamline front line processes (e.g., separation of intake and investigative officers/roles).
- In 2017/2018, the OVO updated its File Tracking System to better manage workloads and provide further information on trends. The Office also implemented an online complaint application, and has future plans to integrate online complaint data with the File Tracking System. The Office also launched a Lean Business Process Improvement initiative.
- In 2019/2020, workflows were developed to better manage systemic report projects. The Office also initiated the process of doing 'micro'-investigations for 'simpler' systemic issues that would be produced more quickly than the more detailed systemic investigations.
- There are further plans to add front line resources in Ottawa to extend service hours and expand the provision of French services, as well there are plans to provide comprehensive front line training to further expedite 'easy to fix' complaints.

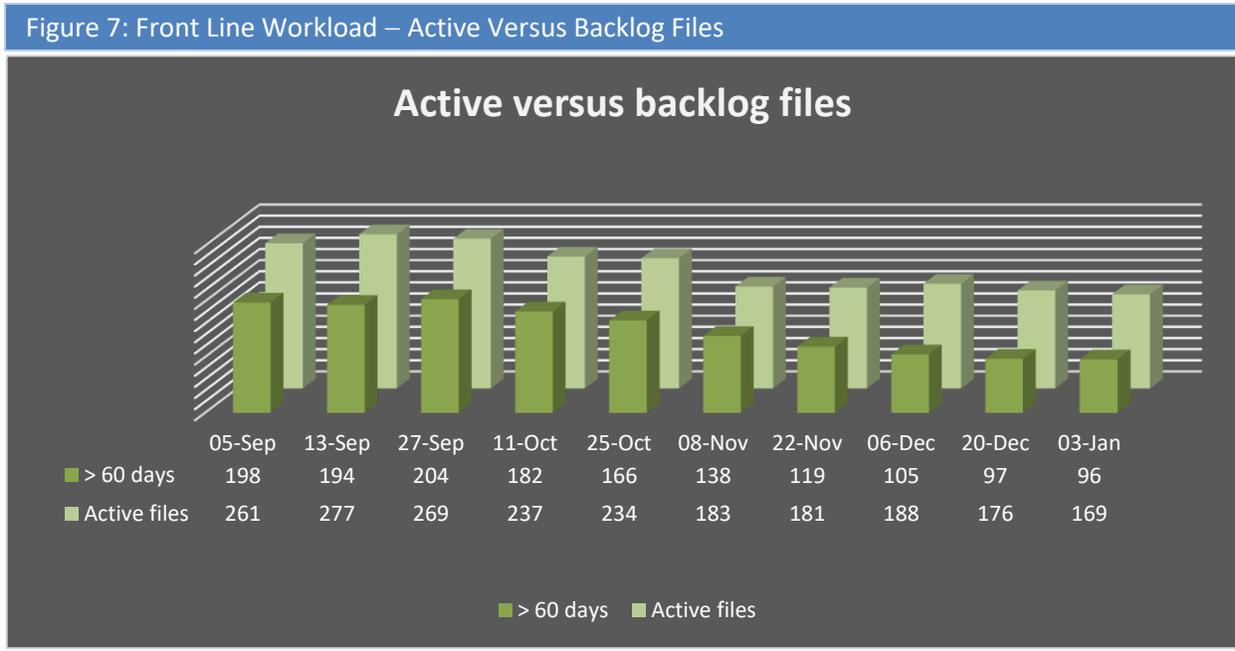
Key internal and external informants suggested that, to further improve efficiencies, there could be more staff specialists on the front line (e.g., marijuana, mental health issues), and the frontline could benefit from having more experience overall with Veterans' issues. Veterans/stakeholders interviewed emphasized the importance of having OVO staff who understand and have experience with Veteran's issues.

Timeliness

While the OVO noted there was a noted lack of capacity/staff to address all complaints quickly, which has caused a backlog; timeliness and the backlog have improved over time:



- In terms of timeliness, the percentage of cases closed within 60 days has increased from 61 percent in 2015-16 to 81 percent at this point in 2019/2020.
- In terms of the backlog, the number of files that have been active for more than 60 days has been reduced by 52 percent between September 2019 and January 2020, as shown in Figure 7 below.



Source: OVO OFTS

The case studies provided two examples of complaints that took more than the standard 60 days to close (one took up to 2 years). The factors noted in these cases that caused time delays included: the complexity of the cases (e.g., initial decline of application by VAC requiring more information from the OVO, the requirement for legal interpretation), the time required to get necessary information from VAC, and delays in receiving final responses from VAC.

Expenditures

The OVO consistently underspent against plans by a four-year average of 15 percent; and, consistently underspend against authorities by a four-year average of 11 percent. However, the variance in spending against plans and authorities has been reduced (spending closer to plans) over time (e.g., only 5-9 percent underspending in 2017/2018; and on track to reduce percent in 2019/2020).

While it is problematic to make direct comparisons, when attempting to compare efficiency between the OVO and some other federal Ombuds offices, the comparative assessment showed that the ratio of workload (number of cases) compared to budget and staff between offices is within same parameters.

Finding 9: The key barriers to efficiency within the OVO include staff turnover and recruitment challenges, and reliance on corporate support and responses from VAC. Frontline efficiencies may be enhanced with OVO abilities to mediate complaints. From the Veteran’s perspective, there is inefficiency in the Government’s multi-layered review/appeal ‘ecosystem’ which involves multiple parties.

OVO key informants noted a few specific efficiency barriers:

- The OVO is a small organization with fewer opportunities for advancement and different classification levels than VAC, which can cause them to lose staff to the department.
- The frontline officers face stressful situations, people and issues on a regular basis, and they operate in an open office (based on government standards) which can challenge their ability to operate efficiently and can increase turnover.
- The OVO’s location in Charlottetown can create staff recruitment challenges, particularly for bilingual resources.
- The OVO provides 10 FTEs to VAC for response services and relies on VAC for corporate support. This hampers the OVO’s ability to be quick and nimble both in terms of providing responses and updating processes (e.g., IT system priority and updates).

Overall, as noted previously, there is redundancy in dealing with Veterans’ complaints at multiple levels by multiple agencies (VAC, VRAB, OVO) that does not lend itself to efficiency in dealing with Veterans’ issues.

Some key informants in the OVO, as well as a few Veterans, suggested that OVO-driven mediation, negotiation and/or arbitration (~alternative dispute resolution or ADR) could bring faster results that provide appropriate legal and ethical relief to the Veteran and prevent similar conflicts from occurring in the future. For example, the federal Procurement Ombudsman is using ADR as a “way to minimize the pain of nasty disputes over the procurement process”.¹³ Also, in 2018, the Government of Australia conducted a study on how veterans and their families are assisted to access entitlements and services. The study found that ADR is an effective process to resolve matters without a Board hearing and that 65.1% of cases were decided without a hearing in 2017-18.¹⁴ However, this option for the OVO to include ADR requires further study as it was out of the scope of this evaluation.

3.2.4 Alternative Governance Structure and Delivery Options

Finding 10: An alternative structure with one integrated federal ombudsman office, reporting to Parliament for independence, could lead to efficiencies for the Government of Canada. However, further study into alternative structures is warranted before any

¹³ <https://canada.constructconnect.com/dcn/news/government/2018/11/new-procurement-ombudsman-stresses-alternative-dispute-resolution-key-tool>

¹⁴ Government of Australia, Veterans’ Advocacy and Support Services Scoping Study, 2018, p. 13.

conclusive finding can be made on the most efficient and effective option for providing federal Ombuds services.

The key suggestion from most other Ombudsmen to increase efficiency, as noted in the comparative assessment, was to bundle all the federal ombudsman offices together into one national Ombuds office that reports to Parliament, with different branches for specific topic areas. This would allow for efficiencies to be gained in terms of staffing (consolidated intake) and corporate services. It would also provide a more independent, simplified and accessible “one-window” for clients. The Venice Principles do not favour one structure or model, noting that the ‘choice of a single or plural Ombudsman model depends on the State organization, its particularities and needs. The Ombudsman Institution may be organized at different levels and with different competences.’¹⁵

A number of OVO key informants and other federal Ombudsman offices also supported the idea of one federal Ombuds office; however, there were a range of other views also expressed including: having the OVO report to Parliament (as per the Venice Principles), and, merging the OVO with the DND/CAF Ombuds office.

3.3 Relevance

The evaluation assessed the relevance of the OVO mandate in light of the changing needs and expectations of Veterans/clients and the changing context in which it operates, as well as whether the OVO has an appropriate level of independence.

3.3.1 Expectations of Veterans/Clients

Finding 11: Veterans expect an independent body to assist them when they believe their rights have not been respected. They expect the OVO to have the authority to investigate any complaint or issue related to Veterans services. However, the OVO’s mandate limits its ability to address key areas of concern, and the review/appeal system is complex and burdensome for Veterans. Despite its narrow mandate, the OVO remains relevant both to address individual complaints and particularly to address systemic issues affecting Veterans.

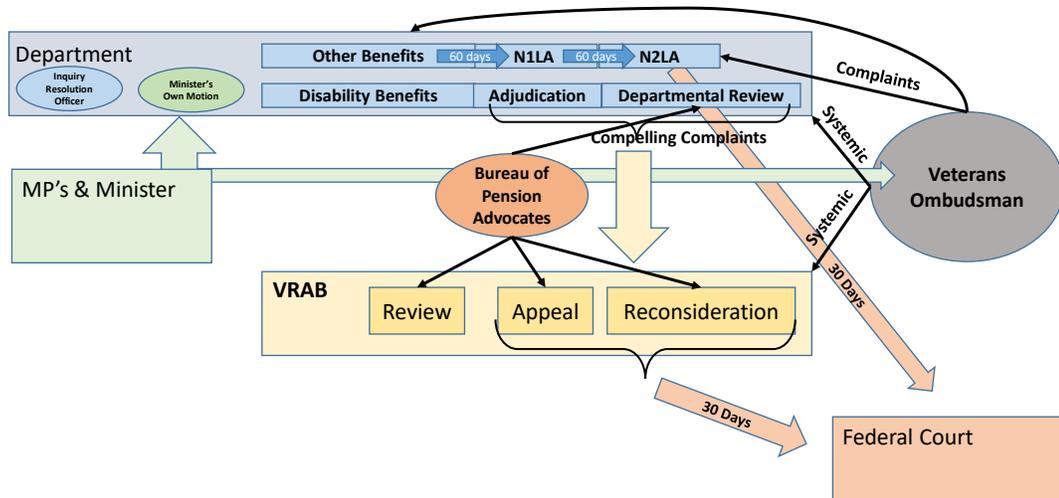
Interviews with Veterans indicate they expect the OVO to assist when their rights have not been respected, or have been treated unfairly and believe the OVO should have the authority to investigate any complaint or issue regarding the implementation of VAC policies. While Veterans noted that there are other organizations that offer support and help as service providers (e.g. the RCL helps with benefit applications), they believe that the OVO’s role is to intervene when there is any unfair treatment by VAC. Individual case studies also showed that Veterans expect the OVO to help reverse VAC decisions that they deem unfair.

¹⁵ Venice Principles, p. 4.

Interviews with OVO key informants and senior managers in VAC also reflected on these expectations. These key informants expect the OVO to provide an independent voice for the fair treatment of Veterans; as well as to conduct systemic investigations on issues that affect Veterans broadly. In fact, most senior managers in VAC indicated that conducting systemic investigations is the key role for OVO as these have benefited thousands of individuals. OVO respondents also noted that the OVO is restricted in terms of addressing 'unfair' VAC decisions for Veterans to health care supports and some Veterans' well-being programs/services. Considering these restrictions, the fact that many groups advocate for Veterans (e.g., RCL), and the new programs in VAC (e.g., from Budgets 2016 and 2017) to better respond to Veterans' needs, some VAC senior leaders questioned the ongoing need for the OVO beyond conducting systemic investigations. However, all Veterans interviewed mentioned the need for an Ombudsman to investigate their complaints.

Overall, both internal (OVO) and external key informants, as well as documentary sources, indicated that the Veterans review and appeal system is not Veteran-centric and is complex and slow. The Veterans benefits review and appeal system has evolved over time and includes two levels of departmental review, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), as well as the OVO (see Figure 1). Also, there is an Ombudsman for the Department of National Defence (DND) and the CAF, which has a clearly distinct role from the OVO, but the different responsibilities are not clear to all Veterans, particularly if an issue occurs when the service member is leaving the CAF. Some Veterans expressed strong concerns regarding VAC's appeal/review system, which they consider deeply flawed and stressed that the OVO needs more independence, needs unrestricted consultation with Veterans and the public, and needs to be able to mediate. A few Veterans also suggested that the OVO act as an arbitrator to avoid costly court cases.

Diagram 5: VAC Veterans Review and Appeal Ecosystem



Source: OVO 'VOAC Deck'

The Order in Council (OIC) requires that a Veteran should exhaust all levels of appeal first before coming to the Ombudsman except in compelling circumstances. However, the OVO noted that even if a Veteran exhausts all their level of appeals, the ability to redress the complaint further becomes a problem as VAC uses the legal argument that they have no authority to pursue the complaint further even if the Ombudsman puts forward a strong case to do so. As a result, Veterans noted that they are frustrated and caught in a confusing review/appeal system.

The comparative assessment sought insights from other Ombuds offices about the optimal process for departmental review of complaints prior to intervention by an Ombudsman. Most noted that Ombudsman offices should have the power to review any complaint, regardless if it has gone through a department service complaint process first. While it was noted that departments should continue to have internal complaints review processes so that they first try to address the issue, the Ombudsman should have the power to look at any complaint and not be restricted (with some specific exceptions like legal opinions), particularly when the department fails to respond to the complainant's request for an internal review.

In the comparative assessment, all Ombudsmen also indicated that systemic investigations are critical to the work of an Ombuds office and may be even more powerful than responding to individual complaints in terms of leading to positive change for many Veterans/clients by addressing the root causes of complaints/issues.

3.3.2 Changing Context

Finding 12: While most complaints from Veterans to the OVO focus on the turnaround time for disability benefits decisions, there are a range of issues affecting Veterans that are varied and more complex since the war in Afghanistan, including mental health.

The documents reviewed indicate that the most common issues affecting Veterans have remained fairly constant over the last five years. OVO Annual reports indicate that the largest percentage of issues/complaints received from 2014/2015 to 2018/2019 related to disability awards and the turnaround time in getting decisions on these awards from VAC. While the OVO has made VAC aware of these concerns and conducted a systemic investigation on this issue, it is not able to resolve these complaints/issues for Veterans as the decisions are not within the OVO's mandate. However, OVO documents also highlight other Veteran issues that have evolved over time including mental health (e.g. PTSD),¹⁶ compensation for pain and suffering (Pension for Life), health support, and family support.

OVO and VAC key informants also indicated that Veterans' needs are varied overall but now are increasingly complex with more mental health issues. However, the data shows that over time, most complaints involve the turnaround time for disability benefits decisions. Interviews with Veterans noted a change in their needs since the war in Afghanistan, including issues of mental health (PTSD), combat injuries, and family support as many have young families. A few also mentioned other issues related to sexual abuse and adjusting to civilian life.

The case studies confirmed the trend and illustrated that complaints/issues are now more complex and can lead to VAC's misinterpretation of legislation and policies. They also illustrated how the OVO can help lead to a positive resolution of these complex issues for Veterans.

As noted above, the recent OVO's systemic investigation on VAC's turnaround time (TAT) on decisions on Veterans/clients benefits applications and appeals made several recommendations to reduce TAT and improve Veterans/clients experience in the process. Interviews with OVO and VAC indicate that the number of individual complaints that the OVO receives every year would be significantly reduced if VAC were to implement the OVO's recommendations on TAT.

3.3.3 Level of Independence

Finding 13: The various lines of evidence show that independence and the 'perception of independence' is critical to the credibility, trust, integrity and effectiveness of an Ombudsman. The OVO was found to operate independently, while reporting to and acting as an advisor to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. However, external stakeholders do not always perceive the OVO as independent and think that the OVO should be fully independent from VAC, (e.g., reporting to Parliament).

¹⁶ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

As well, since the OVO has a limited mandate and powers, most stakeholders think that the OVO should have a legislated mandate and expanded powers (e.g., to investigate any issue, to compel evidence) to be more relevant.

The Venice Principles and input from the comparative assessment confirm that independence is the cornerstone of an Ombudsman Office. Ideally, an Ombudsman is an independent third party reviewer with complete independence from government departments and reporting directly to Parliament. Other countries have also considered the level of independence that is optimal for an Ombudsman and the Venice Principles recommend “a firm legal basis for Ombudsman Institutions, preferably at the constitutional level and/or in a law which defines the main tasks of such an institution, guarantees its independence and provides it with the means necessary to accomplish its functions effectively”. The Venice Principles also recommend that the Ombudsman ‘be elected or appointed according to procedures strengthening to the highest possible extent the authority, impartiality, independence and legitimacy of the Institution’ and ‘preferably be elected by Parliament’.¹⁷

The OIC indicates that the OVO is a special advisor to the Minister of Veterans Affairs (reporting directly to and accountable to the Minister), its employees are employed by VAC, and VAC provides internal services to the OVO. However, based on the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between the OVO and VAC, the OVO has the authority to operate independently.

Most key informants from VAC and OVO agreed that the OVO operates independently despite its reporting structure to the Minister. However, most external stakeholders questioned the independence of the OVO while being employed by and reporting to VAC. Most Veterans and other stakeholders interviewed believe that the OVO should be totally independent from VAC to avoid misperceptions, to safeguard against interference by the Minister/department, and to allow the Office to use more than just ‘moral-suasion’ to achieve results. The majority of Veterans interviewed and OVO respondents favoured full independence and increased powers for the OVO (e.g. compel evidence). Suggestions to address this included being established as a Parliamentary Officer and/or have a legislated mandate with expanded powers (e.g., to respond to any Veterans’ issue, to mediate disputes, and to legally compel evidence).

A few Veterans and other stakeholders noted that this more independent structure could lead to a more adversarial relationship with VAC and may hinder the OVO’s ability to have recommendations acted upon. A few VAC and OVO respondents also mentioned the benefits of being affiliated to the department: an enhanced understanding of the services provided (the ‘business’ of the department); and, greater ability to build relationships with departmental decision-makers to ensure mutual respect and to make an impact. However, it was acknowledged

¹⁷ European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), Principles on The Protection and Promotion of The Ombudsman Institution (“The Venice Principles”), 2019, p. 4.

that the perception of independence is critical as clients have to view the Ombudsman as independent from the department to ensure confidentiality and trust.

Historically, as detailed in the comparative assessment, the 2007 Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (AVCA) recommended that the OVO be established by new legislation and report to Parliament to ensure independence. Instead, the OVO was established by an Order in Council, reporting to the Minister, with the mandate and limitations noted in the OIC. Key informants in VAC and the OVO indicated that the current mandate and structure resulted since the office was established expediently, under pressure, and therefore 'bolted on' to VAC.

In comparing the mandate and powers of the OVO with what was recommended by AVCA in 2007, it is clear that there are key differences in two areas. Contrary to what ACVA originally intended, the OVO lacks:

- The mandate scope to address “all issues pertaining to the care, support, and benefits for all Veterans, their families, and any client of VAC, without limitations”; and,
- “Full access to documents, individuals and groups in any department including power to subpoena”.

This means that the Ombudsman has to rely on maintaining a good working relationship to obtain the necessary information to investigate complaints or identify systemic issues. While moral suasion and maintaining an amicable relationship with government departments is key to the effectiveness of any Ombuds office, regardless of its level of independence, this requirement results in a ‘complicated dance’ between the OVO Ombudsman and VAC’s senior management, as the comparative assessment and a few key informants pointed out. This reliance poses a risk to the effectiveness of the OVO if the working relationship worsens, and, as interviews with Veterans revealed, some question the OVO’s effectiveness because of this risk.

While the OVO structure is mirrored in other federal Ombuds offices, provincial and other international Ombuds institutions have been established as officers of the Legislative Assembly and independent of government and political parties, and have much broader mandates than the OVO. Table 6 below compares Ombuds institutions against the Venice Principles relating to independence and shows that the OVO and other Canadian federal Ombuds institutions have less independence than others.

Table 6: Comparison of Ombuds Independence and Powers			
Venice Principles on Ombuds Institutions Independence European Commission	Provincial/Territorial Ombuds Institutions ¹⁸	Federal Ombuds Offices (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union)	Canadian Federal Ombuds Institutions
Legislated Mandate - preferably	√	√	X
Ombud shall preferably be elected by Parliament	√	√	X

¹⁸ Canada.

Venice Principles on Ombuds Institutions Independence European Commission	Provincial/Territorial Ombuds Institutions ¹⁸	Federal Ombuds Offices (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union)	Canadian Federal Ombuds Institutions
The Ombud shall have discretionary power on his or her own initiative to investigate cases	√	√	√ (for systemic investigations)
The Ombud shall have the power to interview or demand written explanations	√	√	X
The Ombud shall report to parliament on the activities of the institution	√	√	√

Other Ombudsmen surveyed as part of the comparative assessment indicated that the following powers are required for an effective office:

- Power to compel evidence, and have direct access to information. Note that only some Ombudsman offices in Canada (e.g., provincial Ombudsman offices) have this power (not most federal ombudsman offices).
- Power to conduct systemic investigations and determine the topics for those investigations. Most Ombudsmen, including the OVO, have this power and it is deemed to be a critical role. It is also important to have the power to follow up on the implementation of recommendations, as the OVO does.
- Power to provide some binding recommendations, with the focus on using powers of persuasion. Note that no Ombudsman office surveyed had this power and a number did not want this power (felt it was not appropriate).

The Venice Principles, which are considered the standards for Ombuds institutions, recommend that the Ombudsman ‘have a legally enforceable right to unrestricted access to all relevant documents, databases and materials, including those which might otherwise be legally privileged or confidential. This includes the right to unhindered access to buildings, institutions and persons, including those deprived of their liberty.’¹⁹ Furthermore, it notes that the ‘Ombudsman shall have the legally enforceable right to demand that officials and authorities respond within a reasonable time set by the Ombudsman.’²⁰ It should be noted that the Ontario Ombudsman, for example, has these powers.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

²⁰ Ibid.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The following conclusions regarding the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of the OVO are based on the findings of the evaluation and inform the recommendations outlined in section 4.2.

4.1.1 Effectiveness

The OVO has been effective by providing information/referrals; resolving complaints within its mandate; and treating Veterans fairly and respectfully. However, some concerns remain over the timeliness and level communication with Veterans/clients regarding their complaints. As well, more could be done to increase Veterans'/clients' awareness of the OVO and of its role.

The OVO has had a significant impact through systemic investigations and advice to Parliamentarians (with support of other stakeholder groups) which has enhanced benefits and improved outcomes for thousands of Veterans and other clients. This is seen as a central role for the OVO.

4.1.2 Efficiency

The OVO made process improvements and these are ongoing to enhance efficiency in operations, particularly in relation to providing timely responses to Veterans' complaints and in reducing its turnaround time. The OVO's governance structure is clear and stable, and the performance framework has been updated and is robust. The OVO could gain further efficiencies through more staff training and specialization, by expediting simple complaints and with enhanced abilities for the OVO to mediate.

Based on the input from federal Ombuds offices and others in VAC and the OVO, greater efficiencies may also result by integrating federal Ombuds offices (e.g., either in a limited fashion by merging the OVO with the DND Ombuds office, or in a more comprehensive fashion by grouping all federal Ombuds offices into one entity with specialized sections). However, it was out of the scope of this evaluation to examine this in depth and further study would be needed to assess the cost-benefit of such a proposition.

4.1.3 Relevance

There is an ongoing need for the OVO to meet the needs and expectations of Veterans and other clients despite the OVO's limited mandate. Most stakeholders (e.g., interviews with Veterans), the comparative study, and the Venice Principles supported two areas of change to the OVO mandate to ensure it can act, and is perceived as acting, in the best interest of Veterans, including: (1) greater independence, and (2) enhanced powers (e.g., power to compel evidence, as well to mediate/undertake alternative dispute resolution). The evaluation also concluded that the

review/appeal system for Veterans is complex and burdensome, with multiple organizations involved and many levels to navigate. This contributes to confusion for Veterans and undermines the OVO's credibility in terms of the ability to address Veterans' individual complaints.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the evaluation, the evaluation team makes one recommendation to the Veterans Affairs Canada and three recommendations to the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman:

To Veterans Affairs Canada:

1. It is recommended that Veterans Affairs Canada conduct an assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of VAC's review/appeal and complaint resolution streams and processes.

This recommendation responds to findings that Veterans expect the OVO to be independent and have the authority to investigate any complaint or issue related to Veterans services. The current limits of authority within which the OVO can investigate Veterans' issues were noted as key barriers to its overall effectiveness. A review of the overall Veterans review system would be able to best determine the appropriate mandate, level of independence and powers for the OVO relative to other parties (e.g., VAC, VRAB).

This recommendation responds to the evaluation findings that indicate efficiencies may be enhanced with OVO abilities to mediate complaints. Key informants and other jurisdictions have indicated that alternative dispute resolution can lead to the resolution of issues more rapidly, efficiently, and constructively.

This recommendation responds to the evaluation findings that Veterans find the Government of Canada's review/appeal system complicated, burdensome and slow, with multiple levels of appeal and multiple players involved (VAC, VRAB/BPA, OVO, Defence Ombudsman). Veterans expressed frustration regarding VAC's appeal/review system, which they consider deeply flawed. As well, this recommendation could address the findings that there may be more efficient alternatives to the current structure (e.g. merging Ombuds offices), as further study is warranted to examine the best options and such a study should consider the entire Veterans review/appeal system in Canada.

Management Response:

Veterans Affairs Canada agrees with this recommendation.

Management Action Plan:

Corrective Actions to be taken	Office of Primary Interest (OPI)	Target Completion Date
<p>In response to this recommendation, VAC's Audit and Evaluation Division will conduct an evaluation, the evaluation will include:</p> <p>a) Consultation with the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, and VAC's 1st/2nd level appeal units to determine the scope and specific questions, criteria and indicators that will be used for the assessment. Deliverable = Evaluation/Engagement Plan.</p> <p>b) Multiple methods of evidence, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ comprehensive data analysis (including Gender Based Analysis+); ○ feedback from Veterans, stakeholders and program decision makers; ○ documentary reviews of best practices, including informal/formal mediation and alternative dispute resolution methods, and ○ a representative file review of recent decisions. <p>Deliverable = Conclusion of Fieldwork/Examination Phase of Evaluation (including a Summary of Findings)</p> <p>c) Formal recommendations, opportunities for improvement, best practices, and management responses and action plans. Deliverable = Formal Evaluation Report approved by VAC Deputy Minister.</p>	<p>A/Director General, Audit and Evaluation</p>	<p>October 30, 2020</p> <p>March 31, 2021</p> <p>June 30, 2021</p>

To the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman:

1. In considering the evolution of the OVO as VAC services continue to improve and address Veterans' needs, it is recommended that the OVO routinely, through strategic planning, review and ensure its resources are applied to efforts that can have the greatest impact in ensuring fair outcomes for Veterans/clients.

This recommendation responds to the evaluation findings that indicate the OVO is having a large positive impact through its systemic investigations and advice to Parliamentarians, yet is limited by mandate in its ability to affect outcomes based on Veterans' individual complaints. As Veterans' issues are evolving and becoming more complex, and as VAC programs are also

improving to respond to current needs, the time is appropriate to examine the relative level of effort within the OVO to ensure it can be impactful and cost-effective moving forward.

Management Response:

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman agrees with this recommendation.

Management Action Plan:

Corrective Actions to be taken	Office of Primary Interest (OPI)	Target Completion Date
a) As part of the Annual Strategic Planning exercise, assess previous years activities to reallocate resources if needed.	OVO Director Corporate Service & Intervention Unit	Annually, with mid-year review, beginning Spring 2020
b) Assess effectiveness of Micro-investigations and implement recommendations.	OVO Director SRA & Legal Council	Fall 2021

- It is recommended that the OVO optimize its outreach and engagement to continue to enhance its effectiveness in engaging key audiences and to increase awareness about the Office and what it can (and cannot) do for its clients.

This recommendation responds to the evaluation findings that indicate many Veterans/clients are not aware of the OVO or familiar with its role, particularly what can and cannot be implemented and why. As such, Veterans may not be benefitting from the services offered by the OVO. As well, Veterans who do access the OVO may have unrealistic expectations of what can be accomplished based on the OVO's mandate and powers and, if disappointed, may develop negative views of the value and credibility of the OVO.

This recommendation may also help the OVO manage its workflow as currently about 20% of the complaints received are outside mandate – if Veterans better understand what falls within and outside of the OVO's mandate, these complaints may be reduced.

In addition, this recommendation responds to the findings that the way that Veterans wish to engage with the OVO is evolving and it is timely to examine the most effective approaches for engagement moving forward.

Management Response:

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) agrees with this recommendation.

Management Action Plan:

Corrective Actions to be taken	Office of Primary Interest (OPI)	Target Completion Date
a) Engagement plan developed. b) Pilot new approaches to revitalize engagement strategy and diversify channels. c) Rollout of quarterly online newsletter. d) Increase awareness of the OVO within the Veterans' community using social media campaign and measure effectiveness.	OVO Director, Communications Operations	Summer 2020 March 2020, ongoing April 1, 2020, quarterly Fall 2020

3. It is recommended that the OVO continue to improve its client service approach for individual complaints by:
- a. Continuing to improve on providing timely and clear (written) responses to complaints;
 - b. Ensuring training so that frontline staff members have knowledge of current issues and Veterans' experiences; and
 - c. Assessing the need for staff specialization.

This recommendation responds to the evaluation findings that the OVO could be timelier and more transparent in its communications with Veterans. It is recognized that the OVO has and continues to take steps to improve its timeliness.

This recommendation responds to the evaluation findings that indicate that, while frontline efficiency is being addressed, further efficiencies could be possible with staff specializations in key emerging areas (e.g., marijuana, mental health issues) and with staff having greater experience with Veterans' lives and issues in general. As well, continued training can help frontline officers deal with the stressful situations that emerge in their job, and potentially reduce turnover.

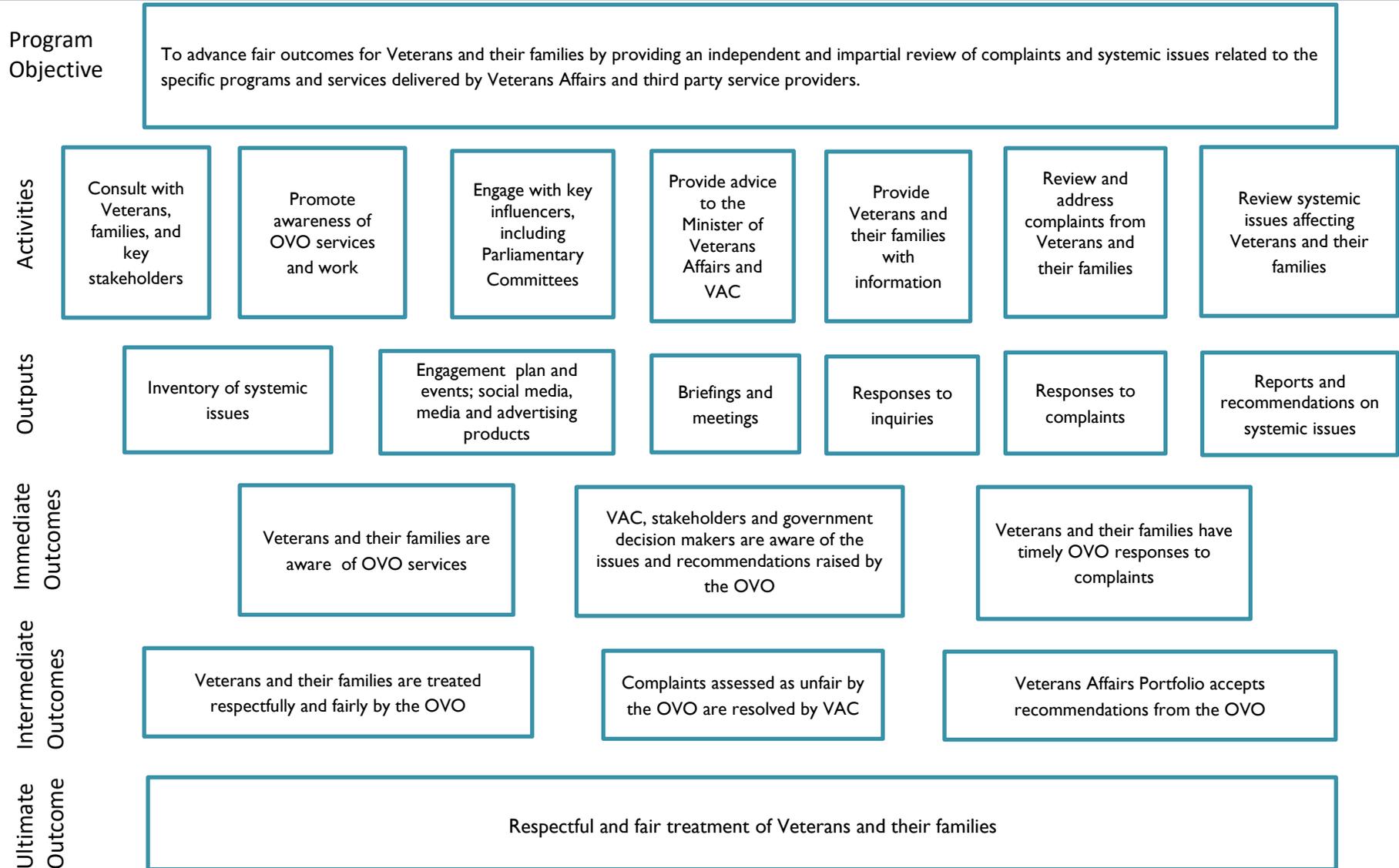
Management Response:

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman agrees with this recommendation.

Management Action Plan:

Corrective Actions to be taken	Office of Primary Interest (OPI)	Target Completion Date
a) To address the timely response and clear written response to complaints:		
a1) New service measurement matrix (monthly) developed and implemented.	OVO Director	October 2020
a2) New processes to support written responses to complaints updated and implemented	Corporate	October 2020
a3) New templates, Client letters, developed to reflect fairness triangle.	Service & Intervention Unit	November 2020
b) Ensure frontline have knowledge of current issues and experiences of Veterans:		
b1) A training package developed addressing the skills required to effectively fulfil the intake and intervention roles.	OVO Director	June 2020
b2) Sessions to increase awareness re military life.	Corporate Service & Intervention Unit	September 2020, quarterly
c) To address the need for staff specialization:		
c1) Pilot project initiated to assess effectiveness of specialization.	OVO Director	September 2020
c2) Pilot project assessment and development of recommendations.	Corporate Service & Intervention Unit	March 2021
c3) Institute a monthly training schedule for VAC SME to brief frontline staff on programs.		September 2021

Annex 1: Office of the Veterans Ombudsman - Logic Model



Annex 2: Evaluation Matrix

Questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Data Collection Method	Source of Data ²¹
Issue: Relevance				
Ongoing need for the OVO				
1. What are the needs and expectations of Veterans/clients for an Ombudsman?	1.1 What unique needs are met by the OVO within the context of its current mandate?	1.a Mandate stated needs addressed by OVO 1.b Types of complaints received 1.c Stakeholders views of OVO mandate	Key Informant Interviews (KII) Document Review (DR) Data base review (DBR) Case studies (SC)	KII: VAC and OVO management & staff; members of Minister Advisory Group (MAG); members of Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council (VOAC) DR: OVO Mandate; annual reports DBR: CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System) CS: file review; systemic review report; OVO KII
	1.2 Considering other bodies/organizations that address Veterans'/clients' concerns/complaints, is there overlap or duplication with the OVO; and, are there any gaps where Veterans'/clients' concerns are unmet?	1.d Degree of overlap with other bodies and organizations addressing Veterans' concerns / complaints 1.e % of Veterans / clients complaints received by the OVO that cannot be addressed within mandate of OVO	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Data base review	KII: VAC and OVO staff, MAG, VOAC DR: Order in Council (OIC) P.C. 2007-530; annual reports; five year strategic and integrated business plan 2017; Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with VAC, 2016-2019 DBR: CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System)

²¹ KII=Key Informant Interviews. DR=Document Review. DBR=Database Review. CA=Comparative Assessment. CS=Case Studies.

Questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Data Collection Method	Source of Data ²¹
Relevance of the OVO over time				
2. Is the OVO's mandate still relevant considering the current context and Veterans'/clients' needs?	2.1 Has the OVO adhered to its mandate (why or why not)?	2.a Degree of change since 2007 2.b Evidence of shift in mandate	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VAC DR: Order in Council (OIC) P.C. 2007-530; Report of the Standing Committee 2007; 2007 Planning documentation; OVO five year strategic and integrated business plan 2017
	2.2 Have the needs of Veterans' changed over time?	2.c Systemic Veterans' issues over time	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VOAC DR: Systemic reports of the OVO over time
3. Is there an appropriate level of independence for the OVO?	3.1 Is there an appropriate level of independence for the OVO?	3.a Adequacy of the OVO level of independence to meet Veterans needs	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Comparative Assessment Case Studies	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: OVO Mandate CA: Procurement / Corrections Ombudsman Offices; By-Monthly Ombudsmen's meeting CS: file review; systemic review report; OVO KII
	3.2 How does the OVO's mandate and powers compare to other ombudsman offices?	3.b Adequacy of OVO mandate and powers compared to others	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Comparative Assessment Case studies	KII: OVO, VAC DR: OVO Mandate CA: Procurement / Corrections Ombudsman Offices; By-Monthly Ombudsmen's meeting CS: file review; systemic review report; OVO KII

Questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Data Collection Method	Source of Data ²¹
Issue: Effectiveness				
Achievement of outcomes				
4. Are Veterans complaints being resolved, and what are the key barriers in the OVO's ability to resolve complaints?	4.1 Are Veterans/clients aware of and accessing the OVO?	4.a % of Veterans and other clients surveyed who indicate they are aware there of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman and the services and benefits it provides 4.b % of official stakeholders (e.g., veterans' groups) engaged annually 4.c # of Town Halls conducted annually across Canada	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Case studies	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: VAC National Surveys/POR, OVO / VAC Annual Reports, Engagement reports/dashboard CS: File review; systemic review report; report card; KII: OVO
	4.2 Are Veterans treated respectfully and fairly by the OVO, and are their concerns addressed by VAC?	4.d % of OVO clients that indicate their complaints were addressed respectfully 4.e % of complaints that were assessed as unfair by the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman that were resolved by Veterans Affairs Canada	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Database Review	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: Client feedback questionnaire DBR: CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System)
	4.3 Do Veterans have timely responses to their complaints?	4.f % of complaints closed within 60 working days 4.g % of OVO clients who indicate they received a response to their complaint when indicated	Document Review Database Review	DR: Client feedback questionnaire DBR: CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System)

Questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Data Collection Method	Source of Data ²¹
	4.4 Do systemic investigations address issues of concern to Veterans/clients?	4.h Effectiveness of mechanisms to identify research topics 4.i Degree of alignment of research with Veteran's concerns over time 4.j Are procedures for conducting and reporting systemic investigations effective?	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Database Review Case study	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: OVO research reports; Report Cards DBR: CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System) CS: systemic review report; report card; OVO KII
	4.5 What internal or external barriers / factors prevent the OVO from achieving its outcomes?	4.k Degree to which barriers prevent achievement of outcomes	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: OVO / VAC annual reports; OVO research reports
5. What impact/change is resulting from systemic report recommendations?	5.1 What impact is resulting from the advice provided to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Parliamentary Committees?	5.a % of OVO recommendations on systemic issues implemented by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio 5.b % of OVO recommendations on systemic issues accepted by the Veterans Affairs Portfolio	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Case studies (CS)	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: OVO / VAC annual reports; Report Cards, 2017 & 2018 CS: File review, KII OVO
Unexpected outcomes and external factors				
6. What additional or unexpected outcomes (positive or negative) have resulted due to the work of the OVO?		6.a Evidence of additional or unexpected outcomes	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VAC, MAG, VOAC DR: VAC / OVO annual reports
Issue: Efficiency				
Performance Measurement				
7. Is the OVO Performance Strategy adequate to measure its impact?	7.1 Are expected outcomes well-articulated to indicate the impact of the OVO	7.a Clarity of outcome statements 7.b Strength of causal link between outcomes and ultimate outcome	Document Review	DR: Evaluability Assessment, Performance Information Profile (PIP)

Questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Data Collection Method	Source of Data ²¹
	7.2 Has a performance measurement strategy been developed and implemented?	7.c Evidence of a measurement strategy 7.d Evidence that the OVO is collecting data to measure its relevance, effectiveness and efficiency	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VAC (AED) DR: Performance Information Profile (PIP); OVO/ VAC annual reports; CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System)
	7.3 Is the OVO performance data reliable, timely, and valid?	7.e Assessment of performance data	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Comparative Assessment	KII: OVO, VAC DR: Evaluability Assessment CA: Procurement / Corrections Ombudsman Offices (<i>how success is measured by others</i>)
	7.4 Is performance information reported and used in decision-making?	7.f Evidence of reporting using OVO performance data 7.g Evidence of use in decision-making	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VAC DR: OVO / VAC annual reports
Governance and Management				
8. Is the governance structure in the OVO appropriate and efficient for achieving expected outcomes?	8.1 How does the OVO's structure facilitate or impede its success (e.g., powers of the OVO, funding model, reporting relationships, succession, etc.)?	8.a Degree to which governance and management structures and processes allow the OVO to achieve expected outcomes	Key Informant Interviews Document Review	KII: OVO, VAC DR: Audit of VAC's Governance, December 2017
	8.2 Has the management approach (direction and processes in the OVO) been strategic and adapted appropriately over time?	8.b Stakeholder perceptions on degree to which changes in direction and processes in the OVO improved its efficiency	Key Informant Interviews	KII: OVO, VAC (current and former)

Questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Data Collection Method	Source of Data ²¹
9. Considering other ombudsman offices, are there alternative structures or delivery options (e.g., powers, tools) that would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the OVO?		9.a Strengths and weaknesses of alternative structures or delivery options to achieve OVO's outcomes and improve efficiency	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Comparative Assessment	KII: OVO, VAC DR: OVO Organizational Chart, February 2019 CA: Procurement and Correctional Ombudsman Offices; By-monthly Ombudsmen meeting
Efficiency of delivery				
10. Have the activities of the OVO been delivered in an efficient and economical manner?	10.1 Does the OVO have the right tools and processes for efficient delivery?	10.a Average time and resources required to resolve complaints 10.b Veterans / clients level of satisfaction with complaint remedy 10.c. % of complaints in the backlog 10.d % of systemic investigations submitted to the Minister within 90 days for micro investigations and within 1 year for systemic investigations 10.e % of engagement plan activities completed annually	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Database review Case studies	KII: OVO DR: Front line service efficiency study, client feedback surveys, Report Cards, review of engagement dashboard DBR: CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System)
	10.2 Do staff have the required capacities, and are they being retained, to promote efficient delivery (e.g., communication and frontline staff)?	10.f Views on staff capacities and retention 10.g Evidence that staff training is offered and accessed 11.h Level of staff turnover	Key Informant Interviews Document Review Case studies	KII: OVO DR: OVO HR and Financial Reports

Annex 3: Case Studies

GGI examined three cases handled by the OVO in recent years to assess effectiveness and efficiency. Two case studies (Case 1 and 2) are based on individual complaints. They provide an overview of issues that have arisen from legislative changes in recent years and the complexity of interpretation as a result. Case 3 is a systemic review of the length of time it takes to get a disability benefit decision from VAC, the most common complaint that the OVO has received from Veterans.

Case 1: Survivor Pension

Background

The complainant was an 85-year-old widow of a Veteran who died in 2013. In 2008, the Veteran received a disability award under the *Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act* (the New Veterans Charter) for his condition of PTSD, a service-related injury. Shortly after the Veteran's passing, his widow applied for a death and survivor benefits.

During the adjudication of the death and survivor benefits, VAC detected an error regarding the 2008 PTSD decision. It discovered that the decision should have been rendered under the *Pension Act* which would have meant the Veteran would have been eligible to receive a monthly disability pension and in turn, the survivor would have been entitled to a full survivors' pension. In a written response, VAC advised that if the survivor wished to pursue this error, she would need to present an appeal at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), which she did.

In February, 2015, VRAB in their decision, instructed VAC to do a recalculation and convert the Veteran's disability award into a monthly pension and granted five years of retroactive benefits. In the interpretation of the decision, VAC decided that it could not grant a disability award and a disability pension for the same condition. As such VAC created an overpayment of over \$136 K to her late husband's account in order for VAC to reclaim the disability award amount originally paid out to the Veteran.

In April 2016, VAC informed the widow that she would have to reimburse the overpayment through a combination of a deduction from her survivor pension and holding back the retroactive payment ensuing from the VRAB decision. She contacted the OVO in February 2017 following several unsuccessful interactions with VAC.

OVO Assessment and Findings

The OVO reviewed the file. It also noted that VAC had not responded to the complainant's Bureau of Pension Advocate (BPA) lawyer's opinion, sent to VAC in June 2016, to the effect that VAC could not claim a reimbursement from the widow after the Veteran's death and in particular after the estate had been closed for a number of years. In its review of the case, the OVO concluded that the widow had not been treated fairly. Given the age of the widow, the complexity of the file, and

the tone of VAC's communications with an 85-year-old widow, the OVO decided to handle this case on a priority basis.

The OVO advised VAC that it did not have the legal authority to create an overpayment and then claim a reimbursement of the overpayment under the *Pension Act* because it had been made to the Veteran prior to his death. VAC agreed. VAC reimbursed the widow the money withheld from the retroactive payment and the deduction made to the monthly survivor pension.

Efficiency

The OVO noted that it took two years to resolve the issue from the time OVO received the complaint to the moment VAC communicated its decision to the complainant (February 2017-February 2019). OVO indicated that this was due to the complexity of the file. The sequence of activities on the case was as follows:

- March 2017-March 2018 back and forth with VAC to obtain all the necessary information on the file and to fully understand the situation.
- In March 2018, the OVO asked for an interpretation and position from the Department. A response was provided in May 2018, following which the OVO questioned VAC's interpretation which led VAC's asking for its own legal interpretation.
- In October 2018, with no response from VAC, the request was raised to the level of the assistant to the deputy minister (ADM). A favorable response was provided to the OVO on November 26, 2018.
- The OVO made a further request regarding the department's response and received the final response in January 2019 with a full resolution of the complaint.

Case 2: Career Impact Allowance / Supplement

Background

The Veteran had originally applied for the Rehabilitation Services and Vocational Assistance Program for right and left ankles, left hip, left knee, and chronic pain in June 2017.

In July 2017, the Veteran applied for a Career Impact Allowance (CIA). In February 2018, VAC informed her that her claim for CIA had been declined. VAC denied eligibility because the conditions considered (right and left ankle) did not meet the CIA eligibility criteria. VAC did not consider 'pain disorder associated with a medical condition' because this condition was not approved for rehabilitation program services and, therefore, was not taken into consideration for CIA eligibility purposes.

In consultation with the Disability Adjudication Team Leader and National Program Service Specialist, VAC has maintained that there is a distinction between "chronic pain", which represents a symptom of a physical health problem(s), and the specific diagnosis of "pain disorder associated with a medical condition", which represents a separate and distinct mental health problem under Chapter 21 of the 2006 Table of Disabilities.

The Veteran later reapplied for CIA and was approved in September 2019 based on a new awarded condition of PTSD granted in April 2019 and the fact that it had been added to her Rehabilitation plan. The Veteran felt that the CIA should have been granted in first application.

OVO Assessment and Findings

The OVO reviewed the file and considered that the Veteran had been treated unfairly. It noted that CIA is payable when the Veteran meets the following criteria:

- a) has one or more physical or mental health problems that are creating a permanent and severe impairment;
- b) had an application for rehabilitation services approved; and
- c) had been granted a disability award or a disability pension.

From its review of the file, the OVO determined that the Veteran's claim should have met all the above criteria and should have been granted the CIA. The two conditions - 1) the DA condition (pain disorder associated with a medical condition) and 2) the rehabilitation condition (chronic pain) - are related in that chronic pain is an established symptom of the 'pain disorder associated with a medical condition'.

Although disability entitlement was initially denied once the symptom (chronic pain) was identified as 'pain disorder associated with a general medical condition' entitlement was granted. The pain specialist refers to the condition as chronic pain in his treatment plan. Furthermore, the description of 'Pain disorder associated with a medical condition' found in the DSM-IV is as follows: "a general medical condition has a major role in the onset, severity, exacerbation, or maintenance of the pain. (If psychological factors are present, they are not judged to have a major role in the onset, severity, exacerbation, or maintenance of the pain.)" The specialist concluded that the Veteran's symptoms fit the DSM-IV criteria.

The above establishes that chronic pain is a symptom of the entitled condition and is supported by the Pain Specialist.

The evidence also indicated that the DA condition was a component of her rehabilitation program and most likely viewed by the Case Manager (CM) as chronic pain. The CM was coordinating psychological and physiotherapy services with the objective of achieving management of pain levels. Although it is referred to as a mental health problem, it remains that the disability entitlement condition refers to the chronic pain experienced by the Veteran and it is the chronic pain that was approved for rehabilitation program services.

In sum, the basis of the original decision seems to revolve around an issue of terminology. The common denominator is the fact that the Veteran was experiencing debilitating pain in her left ankle for which she is receiving both disability benefits and rehabilitation services.

The OVO recommended a review of the CIA eligibility date retroactive to the date of initial application in July, 2017.



Efficiency

The OVO received the complaint in September 2018 and made its recommendation to VAC in October, 2019. At the time of writing this report VAC had not rendered a decision. Since reception of the complaint the approximate timeline was as follows:

- In November, 2018 VAC declined the Veteran's application again (N2LA).
- The OVO and Veteran gathered more information for the file. There was correspondence between the OVO and the Veteran in June, July, August, 2019 on the status of the file and applications made to VAC;
- In June, 2019, the Veteran found out that her subsequent CIA application was still at the Adjudication stage.
- OVO contacted Service Delivery in July 2019 and again in October 2019 without yet having reached a resolution.

Case 3: Meeting Expectations: Timely and Transparent Decisions for Canada's Ill and Injured Veterans

Background

The Review²², published in 2018, noted that the length of time for VAC to make a decision on claims is the most frequent complaint the OVO receives from Veterans. To study this issue, the OVO analyzed 1,000 disability benefit first applications and conducted on-site visits with VAC staff. It also reviewed all available internal and external documents that provide guidance to staff on processing and adjudicating applications, including legislation to business processes.

OVO Assessment and Findings

The analysis that the OVO conducted suggested that while VAC met the 16-week service standard for applications from Veterans with World War II or Korean War service, the majority of all other disability benefit first decisions, however, took longer – sometimes much longer.

It found three patterns or trends emerging from the applications, showing inconsistencies on how certain groups of Veterans were treated:

- Francophone applicants waited longer than Anglophone applicants, on average.
- Delays were longer for women compared to men.
- Discrepancies with how the Service Standard Start Date – or the date the “clock starts ticking” – is determined, Veterans with less need may see their applications move forward in the queue before others.
- Disability benefit decisions made under the *Pension Act* provide better access to treatment benefits.

²² <https://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/eng/reports/reports-reviews/timely-transparent-decisions>

- Veterans and their families are treated unfairly when the Veteran dies while an application is in progress and they do not have a surviving spouse or dependent child.

The Review also found that:

- A lack of prioritization for those who may be at risk for having unmet health needs.
- A lack of transparency and communication throughout the process, both in terms of how turnaround time is reported and on the status of Veterans application or the reason for delays.

Based on its findings, the OVO made the following seven recommendations (based on the OVO report card, highlighted recommendations have been implemented):

1. Provide equitable access to timely decisions regardless of factors such as the applicant's gender and language.
2. Standardize Service Standard Start Dates to improve transparency and equity and facilitate accurate performance reporting.
3. Triage applications upon receipt based on health and financial need.
4. Reimburse all Veterans' health care expenses for approved claimed conditions 90 days prior to their date of application.
5. When a Veteran dies with a disability benefit application in progress, continue to process the application and permit payment to the estate if the decision is favourable.
6. Provide each applicant with an individualized, expected turnaround time for their application, and inform them if the decision will be delayed and why.
7. Provide clients with a checklist of all required documents on the application form and, upon receipt, immediately return applications if required documents are missing.

Efficiency

The OVO noted that the time and human resources (FTE)²³ used for the systemic review was similar to other systemic investigations, as follows:

- Senior management approved the project plan in March 2017;
- Document collection, review and analysis began in May 2017 (1 senior FTE);
- Request for first data sample sent to VAC in summer 2017; received in September 2017;
- Second sample requested in fall of 2017 and received in December 2017;
- Data analysis (review of over 1,000 disability benefit application decisions), document review and analysis (business processes etc.) and on-site visits (2 senior FTEs - co-leads);
- Report writing (once analysis completed) in January 2018 and first draft completed in April 2018 – 2 senior FTEs;
- Report submitted to the Minister in July 2018; and
- Publication in September 2018.

²³ Full time equivalent.

Annex 4: List of Documents / Databases Reviewed

OVO documents:

- Five-Year Strategic Plan Priorities and Key Activities
- OVO Strategic Plan Placemat May 30
- Annual Reports, 2008-09 to 2017-18
- Client Satisfaction Survey by Corporate Research Associates, 2014
- CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System) Category, Issue and Finding Types document indicating the data fields being collected OVO Charlottetown Operations (Contact Centre)
- Integrated Business Plan, 2017-2019 & 2019-2021
- Highlights from stakeholder meetings, 2016-2018
- Logic Model, 2015-2016 (archived)
- List of Veterans Groups, 2016
- Memorandum of Understanding with VAC - Internal Services and Information Sharing, 2017
- Order in Council (OIC) P.C. 2007-530, April 3, 2007
- Organizational Chart, February 2019
- OVO Research Reports, 2008-2018
- The OVO within the Veterans Benefits Review and Appeal Eco-system (Draft Nov. 2019)
- Performance Information Profile (PIP), August 2018
- Report Cards, 2017 & 2018
- Salary and O&M as per OVO Financial Statements, March 19, 2019
- Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with VAC, 2016-2019
- 2007 Planning documentation
- Veterans and Other Client feedback questionnaire by Corporate Research Associates, 2013
- Website content:
 - Mandate
 - Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council Terms of Reference and members
 - Success stories
- What We Do (PPP)
- Approved Veterans Ombudsman GC InfoBase, Jan 23 2019
- CRM (Ombudsman File Tracking System)
- Federal Ombudsman Concept Paper (Draft Dec. 2019)
- OVO Five-Year Strategic Plan Priorities and Key Activities
- Salary and O&M as per OVO Financial Statements, March 19, 2019
- Veterans Review and Appeal Board Pamphlet: An Independent Tribunal, 2010

VAC documents:

- Audit of VAC's Governance, December 2017
- Departmental Plan, 2018-19

- Departmental Results Framework, 2019-2020
- Intranet content: Confidentiality of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, August 24, 2016
- Memorandum of Understanding with VAC - Internal Services and Information Sharing, 2017
- Departmental Results Reports, 2014-15 to 2018-19
- VAC National Survey 2017

Other documents:

- Media scan of OVO coverage, 2010-2018
- Scan of Ombudsman Offices (various websites)
- Evaluability Assessment of the OVO done by Goss Gilroy Inc., 2019
- Report of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, 2007 - “A Helping Hand for Veterans: Mandate for a Veterans Ombudsman”
- Order in Council (OIC) P.C. 2007-530, April 3, 2007
- Organizational Design Review: Exploring Structural Efficiencies, by Louis Sequin. May 2018

Annex 5: Interview Guides

Office of the Veterans Ombudsman

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview. Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI) was contracted to undertake the evaluation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) to assess its relevance and performance (effectiveness and efficiency). The findings and recommendations of the evaluation will be used by the OVO to further improve program implementation and, if needed, make the necessary course corrections.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential, in accordance with the *Privacy Act*. The answers and comments provided by respondents will be aggregated and not attributed to any individuals. Aggregated data may be shared with the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman and/or Veterans Affairs Canada. Personal information collected will not be used for any administrative purpose or purpose other than the evaluation.

Introduction

Please indicate briefly your position, role and length of time with the organization.

Please respond to any of the questions below that you wish to comment on. Not all questions may be relevant for you.

Effectiveness

1. Are Veterans/clients aware of and accessing the OVO?
 - a. How does the OVO engage with Veterans groups on a regular basis? To what effect?
2. To what degree are Veteran/client complaints being resolved?
 - a. Overall, how successful is the OVO in getting VAC to resolve complaints brought to its attention?
 - b. What are the key barriers in the OVO's ability to resolve complaints?
3. To what extent do the topics for systemic investigations address issues of concern to Veterans/clients? Please provide examples.
4. What has been the impact of the advice/recommendations provided to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Parliamentary Committees? Please provide examples.
5. To your knowledge, has the OVO's work led to unexpected outcomes? Please provide examples.

Efficiency

6. What are your views on the new performance measurement strategy? Will it be able to articulate the performance story of the OVO? When will it be implemented?
7. Over the last few years, has the OVO's performance data been reliable, timely, and valid?
8. To what extent has performance information been reported and used in decision-making?
9. Does the OVO have the right tools and processes for efficient delivery?
10. Do staff members have the required capacities, and are they being retained, to promote efficient delivery, e.g., communication and frontline staff?

11. Has the OVO's management approach (e.g. direction and processes) been strategic and adapted appropriately over time?
12. Is the governance structure in the OVO appropriate and efficient for achieving expected outcomes (e.g., organizational structure, powers, funding model, reporting relationships, succession plans)?
13. Are there alternative structures or delivery options (e.g., powers, tools) that would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the OVO?
14. Do you have additional comments?

Relevance

15. What were the factors /considerations that shaped the OVO's mandate when it was first established? How has this changed over time?
16. In your view, what unique needs are met by the OVO within the context of its current mandate?
 - a. What type of issues / complaints received by the OVO cannot be addressed within the current mandate?
17. What are the other bodies/organizations that address Veterans'/clients' concerns/complaints? Is there overlap or duplication with the OVO? Are there gaps?
18. How have the needs of Veterans changed over time? Has the OVO been able to respond to these changing needs?
19. Does the OVO have an adequate level of independence to fulfil its mandate and/or meet Veterans' needs?
 - a. How does the OVO's mandate and powers compare to other ombudsman offices?

Thank you very much for your input

Veterans Affairs Canada

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview. Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI) was contracted to undertake the evaluation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) to assess its relevance and performance (effectiveness and efficiency). The findings and recommendations of the evaluation will be used by the OVO to further improve program implementation and, if needed, make the necessary course corrections.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential, in accordance with the *Privacy Act*. The answers and comments provided by respondents will be aggregated and not attributed to any individuals. Aggregated data may be shared with the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman and/or Veterans Affairs Canada. Personal information collected will not be used for any administrative purpose or purpose other than the evaluation.

Introduction

Please indicate briefly your position, role and length of time with the organization.

Please respond to any of the questions below that you wish to comment on. Not all questions may be relevant for you.

Effectiveness

1. Do you think Veterans/clients are aware of and accessing the OVO?
2. Do you think Veterans are treated respectfully and fairly by the OVO?
3. In your opinion, overall, how successful has VAC been in resolving complaints brought to its attention by the OVO?
4. To what extent do the topics for systemic investigations address issues of concern to Veterans/clients? Please provide examples.
5. What has been the impact of the OVO advice/recommendations provided to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Parliamentary Committees? Please provide examples.
6. To your knowledge, are there barriers that affect the OVO's level of success?
7. Has the OVO's work led to unexpected outcomes?

Efficiency

8. In your view, is the performance of the OVO reported and used in decision-making? Do you think the OVO's performance data is reliable, timely, and valid?
9. Does the OVO have the right tools and processes for efficient delivery?
10. Does the OVO's governance structure and management approach facilitate or impede its success? Has the OVO's approach been strategic and adapted appropriately over time?
11. Do you have additional comments?

Relevance

12. What were the factors /considerations that shaped the OVO's mandate when it was first established? How has this changed over time?
13. In your view, what unique needs are met by the OVO? Is this a required and appropriate role?



14. What are the other bodies/organizations that address Veterans'/clients' concerns /complaints? Is there overlap or duplication with the OVO? Are there gaps?
15. How have the needs of Veterans changed over time? Has the OVO been able to respond to these changing needs?
16. Does the OVO have an adequate level of independence to fulfil its mandate?

Thank you very much for your input

Veterans Stakeholders

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview. Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI) was contracted to undertake an independent evaluation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) to assess its relevance and performance (effectiveness and efficiency). The findings and recommendations of the evaluation will be used by the OVO to further improve program implementation and, if needed, make the necessary course corrections.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential, in accordance with the *Privacy Act*. The answers and comments provided by respondents will be aggregated and not attributed to any individuals. Aggregated data may be shared with the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman and/or Veterans Affairs Canada. Personal information collected will not be used for any administrative purpose or purpose other than the evaluation.

Introduction

Please tell me a little bit about yourself and how you are engaged with or aware of the OVO?

Please respond to any of the questions below that you wish to comment on. Not all questions may be relevant to you.

Relevance

1. What are the needs and expectations of Veterans/clients for an Ombudsman?
2. To what degree do you think the OVO is currently meeting these needs? Why/why not?
3. Are there other bodies or organizations that also address Veterans' needs? How are these different from the OVO? Are there any gaps in meeting Veterans' needs?
4. How have the needs of Veterans changed over time? Has the OVO been able to respond to these changing needs?
5. Is there an appropriate level of independence for the OVO?

Effectiveness

6. Do you think Veterans/clients are aware of and accessing the OVO?
7. Do you think Veterans are being treated respectfully and fairly by the OVO?
8. Are Veterans' issues/complaints being resolved by the OVO? If not, please indicate why you think they are not being resolved.
9. If relevant to you, do you think the OVO engages with Veterans groups appropriately?
10. If relevant to you, what do you think has been the impact of the advice/recommendations provided by the OVO to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Parliamentary Committees?
11. Do you have any additional comments?

Thank you very much for your input