

October 2018

Summary of Regional Summits

VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA



Veterans Affairs
Canada

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Canada

*“Be direct. Be matter of fact.
Don’t oversell. Don’t undersell.”*

Summit Participant



Veterans Affairs
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A. Executive Summary

The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada are committed to ensuring Veterans, their families and stakeholders are informed about our policies, programs and services. As part of delivering on this commitment, the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Department have hosted more than 40 events in 2018 including regional summits, town halls and round tables. Each event was an opportunity to share information and hear feedback on Pension for Life, the new benefits and services which came into effect April 1, 2018 such as the Education and Training Benefit and Caregiver Recognition Benefit, as well as other issues of interest to the participants. The Minister heard from many Veterans across the country who are extremely passionate about how Canada cares for its Veterans and their families, and how their contributions to Canada and the world are recognized.

Each comment, question or remark during these events is important. The concerns raised at the sessions related most often to the following six themes:

- Pension for Life and its implementation
- Transition from the Canadian Armed Forces to Veterans Affairs Canada
- Veteran Homelessness
- Communication and Engagement with Veterans and their families
- Care, Compassion and Respect for Veterans
- Service Delays

While many participants acknowledged that Veterans Affairs Canada is making progress on addressing issues related to these six themes and other issues, there were also comments that indicated that the Department could and should do more.

Feedback from the meetings with Veterans and stakeholders across the country over the last ten months has been shared with the program, policy and service delivery areas of the Department, and will continue to inform decisions moving forward. The issues discussed during the regional summits will form the basis of the upcoming National Stakeholder Summit taking place in Ottawa on October 29 and October 30, 2018.



B. Introduction

During the summer of 2018, the Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence hosted regional stakeholder summits in Toronto, Vancouver, Moncton and Calgary. The purpose of the summits was to hear from stakeholders. Presentations from the Department were short and served as introductions to the breakout sessions. While facilitated by Veterans Affairs Canada staff, the breakout sessions and discussions were driven by the participants themselves and were an opportunity for locally-based stakeholders to discuss issues of importance to Veterans and their families.

The four, day-long regional summits were attended by more than 100 stakeholder groups. Each regional summit followed the same format (see Appendix A for the agenda) discussing: Pension for Life, Transition, Veteran Homelessness, and Communication and Engagement. Participants were invited to pose questions to the Minister and Departmental officials throughout the day on the discussions of the day and any other related issues that were of concern to them. Local Area Office staff in attendance helped facilitate breakout sessions, networked with stakeholders, and provided support as necessary to a multitude of questions from participants.

The first regional summit was held in Toronto on June 25, 2018 followed by Vancouver on June 26. The remaining two regional summits were held in Moncton on July 13, with the final one in Calgary on August 25. These summits included a broad range of participants – traveling from community to community allowed for a wider diversity of stakeholders to participants. We know that Veterans and their families face different realities based on a multitude of factors – traveling to four different cities allowed us to hear from community-based groups who spoke as, or on behalf of Veterans, and provided immense insight to the lived realities of Veterans and their families across Canada.



C. Summit Topics and Discussions

Theme #1: Pension for Life

Each summit opened with an overview of Pension for Life, and touched on the new monthly well-being benefits that came into effect on April 1, 2018 including: the Education and Training Benefit, Caregiver Recognition Benefits, Redesigned Career Transition Services, Veterans Emergency Fund, End Time Limits for Vocational Assistance, Veterans and Well-Being Fund, Veteran Family Program and the Centre of Excellence on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Other Related Mental Health Conditions. The Minister and the Deputy Minister addressed the top questions related to Pension for Life that they had heard while hosting town halls and round tables during the winter and spring. This included the current backlog of claims, the timing for implementation and monthly payments for those who already received a lump sum.

An open Question and Answer session followed the Pension for Life overview. Over the four summits, the following points were often raised:

- Return to a monthly option is appreciated; there is some concern about how this will impact individuals who already received their full disability award entitlement.
- Questions were raised about what Pension for Life will mean for a number of individualized scenarios; the focus on those who need it the most is appreciated but there were questions over what this means.
- Stakeholders asked that information on Pension for Life calculations is communicated early and often.

Theme #2: Transition

A joint presentation by Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada representatives highlighted the recent improvements made to supporting seamless transition including: structural changes within the Canadian Armed Forces in terms of new units and processes, new programs for education and training, enhancements to employment such as Career Transition Services and finally the benefits and services available to support families like the Caregiver Recognition Benefit. Participants were assured that Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces are working together to resolve the remaining challenges to a seamless transition for military members to post-service life.

Following the presentation, participants were asked to identify gaps, challenges, or desired outcomes. The following key points were raised during these discussions:

- There is a need to eliminate the duplication of effort between Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces to make things simple for Veterans and members.
- Medical supports need to be discussed with members leaving the military so they understand the coverage they will receive post service.
- Need to identify a network of local resources that can reach out to Veterans and assist them during the transition process.
- Partner organizations can be a huge benefit to Veterans Affairs Canada if involved in the process. Military Family Resource Centres need to play a larger role locally in the transition process.



- Need to push forward with the concept of “tell your story once” as there is an overwhelming number of instances where a Veteran has to explain his or her situation more than once or twice.
- Families are key throughout the entire transition process and they should be involved early to ensure the best outcomes for the transitioning member.
- Every Veteran has a different transition experience but increased attention on post-release employment opportunities would be appreciated.

At the summit in Moncton, which is surrounded by smaller and more rural communities than the other big cities visited, the need for service access beyond urban boundaries was highlighted, and the suggestion was made to use Reserve units as centres for releasing members to “keep in touch” and receive support.

Theme #3: Veteran Homelessness

The Minister spoke about the importance of addressing Veteran homelessness and stressed that one homeless Veteran is one too many. The role of local Veterans Service Team Managers and Case Managers in dealing with Veteran homelessness was highlighted along with the types of regional supports that are available.

Participants were provided with an overview of a National Roundtable on Homelessness hosted by the Department in Ottawa on June 7, 2018. The purpose of the round table was to engage stakeholders and community partners on issues related to Veterans homelessness. The approach reflected one of the key findings from the summit which is that the solution to Veterans homelessness will occur at the community level; for this reason, groups heavily engaged in the homelessness space who work with Veterans, but not exclusively Veterans, were also invited to the summit.

Main points raised during the National Roundtable included the effective dissemination of information, peer to peer support, “Housing First” strategy, Veterans’ identification card and a strong collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations. Collaboration and information sharing between those engaged in the homelessness space was another key theme.

Summit participants then broke into groups to discuss local experiences supporting homeless Veterans or at risk Veterans and if they made use of Veterans Affairs Canada supports during the process.

These discussions highlighted the following points:

- There is a need to create a network/community of support for homeless Veterans. This would include food banks and emergency health professionals. Much of this may already exist but there is a lack of awareness amongst key providers.
- Need to look into dealing with young homeless Veterans as they seem not to know where to turn for help.
- Affordable housing is required for the homeless or in crisis Veteran, be it in hotels, apartments or shelters. There is also a need to look towards longer-term housing options for Veterans so that they know they will have a roof over their head, 3, 6, 12, 18 months down the road. This will provide necessary stability.
- There is interest around how the Veteran Emergency Fund is being distributed and who can access it.
- Regional approaches work best in helping to address Veteran homelessness, with partnerships being key to the solution.
- There is a need to develop regional lists of regional or local services and organizations who can help address homelessness. Veterans’ organizations should be included.

- Some groups were acutely aware of VAC's services while others were learning about them for the first time; there is a need to ensure dissemination of information to all engaged partners.

Additionally, participants in Vancouver noted a need for regular street walks to identify homeless Veterans and to distribute "emergency" kits to them. In Calgary, it was proposed for homeless Veterans who are in the Disability Award application process that Veterans Affairs Canada bridge them by paying their rent in shelters. A comment made in Moncton, noted that there are no shelters for families.

Theme #4 – Communication and Engagement

Discussion about communication and engagement took place in breakout groups. During this session, participants were asked to discuss how they, as organizations, disseminate information to their members as well as the quality of products that are provided by Veterans Affairs Canada. The following key feedback was shared during these discussions:

- My VAC Account is a great mode for communication, however not all Veterans are online and therefore need to be connected in other ways.
- Veterans Affairs Canada digital presence has improved but the Department should not forget that face-to-face communications is key to many Veterans and Veteran groups.
- Many of the stakeholders pointed to social media as their main platform for communication.
- Implementing a strong regional structure for communications may be most effective for some groups.
- Veterans Affairs Canada information needs to be consistent and sharing of information needs to be in a timely fashion when there is a change in a program/policy.
- Work needs to be done around Veterans Affairs Canada providing information to feed into stakeholder communications.

Participants in Vancouver highlighted the need for a cohesive stakeholder voice to effectively advocate for Veterans. In Toronto, where there is a high concentration of Reservists, it was felt there is a need to improve the information flow to them as the network is not the same as it is for other groups. Also in Toronto, they noted optimism about a trial of the "One Door Open" approach in place at the Canadian Forces Base Borden Integrated Personnel Support Centre whereby results will be reviewed to ensure optimal success is achieved.

Other Veterans Issues

Finally, although the bulk of the discussions that took place during the regional summits focused on the four central themes on the agenda, there was a consistency among the four meetings in some of the other issues raised, which included:

- The need to understand fully why some claims take longer to process, and what steps the Department is taking to support staff in processing these claims.
- Concern that the eligibility criteria for the Caregiver Recognition Benefit may be too broad and not serving as many Veterans and their families as they would like.
- More supports are needed for Métis and Aboriginal Veterans.
- While the culture at Veterans Affairs Canada appears to be changing, more can always be done to ensure front line staff are respectful when dealing with Veterans.
- The need for an individual calculator for the Pension for Life prior to April 1, 2019, so Veterans can anticipate how the new benefits will impact them.

D. Town Halls and Round Tables

In addition to the regional stakeholder summits, the Minister and Deputy Minister hosted town halls with Veterans and round tables with stakeholder organizations from January to October 2018. They travelled from the East Coast to the West Coast and many points in between. They spoke to hundreds of Veterans and key stakeholders, providing an opportunity to share with them information on the Pension for Life and the new benefits and services which came into effect April 1, 2018. They also encouraged those present to ask questions and raise any concerns they may have. Local Veterans Service Team Managers and Case Managers were present at these meetings and provided support to Veterans who wanted to discuss their own cases privately.

The town halls in particular provided an opportunity for individual Veterans to share their often moving stories with the Minister, Veterans Affairs Canada staff present and their fellow Veterans. Mental health was an issue that was of particular concern at these meetings. Veterans spoke about their struggles with mental health and their frustration with wait times for approval of applications and other parts of the processes of the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada. They told their personal stories, including how some had come to terms with their illness, dealing with the loss of careers, the impact these issues have on them and their families, and the strength it takes to ask for help. The perspectives raised by the Veterans in attendance were foundational to informing how we talk about our benefits and how we approach implementation and policy development moving forward.

What We Heard

Issues and concerns raised at the regional summits related to homelessness, transition and communications proved consistent with those heard at the round tables and town halls. Other issues raised across the country were also consistent, from town halls to round tables to summits.

1. Service Delays

- Participants expressed anxiety about the back log of applications decisions. A lack of communication around the status on an application, was cited as something that causes financial and emotional strain for the Veteran community.

2. Service Income Security Insurance Plan

- Veterans expressed dislike for the Service Income Security Insurance Plan as it is perceived as adding to their stress and anxiety. They feel that the plan is bureaucratic and that retaining it does not meet their needs.



3. Culture at VAC

- While there is recognition that VAC is undergoing a culture change, frustration was expressed at the pace of these changes. Some participants spoke very highly of their case managers and VAC support teams. While others reflected on what they perceive as the “No” first culture at Veterans Affairs Canada, as well as the inconsistency in level of knowledge among case managers when providing advice and guidance to Veterans.

4. ID Card

- Veterans would like to have a Veterans identification card. This feedback led directly to the announcement of the Veteran Service Card on September 11, 2018.

5. Complexity of VAC programs faced by Veterans

Participants noted that claim forms are still too long and too complex. Many were concerned about the number of programs which causes confusion among some Veterans.

E. Next Steps

Listening to Veterans, their families and stakeholders through these meetings over the past ten months has been extremely valuable and informative. Feedback has been captured and shared within the Department to inform policy, program and services development and improvements. At the upcoming National Stakeholder Summit in Ottawa on October 29 and 30, 2018, the Department will be asking representatives to consider the same issues and to share their perspectives and feedback to support our Veterans and their families.



Appendix A: Regional Summit Agenda

| Time (local) | Description | Presenters |
|--------------|--|--|
| 9:30 | Coffee and Registration | |
| 10:00 | Welcome | Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister |
| 10:05 | Opening Remarks | The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence |
| 10:15 | Pension for Life Q & A session | The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence and Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister |
| 10:50 | Transition Presentation followed by a group discussion | The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence Elizabeth Douglas, Director General Service Delivery and Program Management Canadian Armed Forces |
| 12:00 | Lunch | |
| 12:45 | Veterans Homelessness Presentation followed by a group discussion | The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence Faith McIntyre, Director General, Policy and Research Veteran Service Team Manager |
| 13:55 | Communication and Engagement Group Discussions | Steven Harris, Director General of Communications Area Director |
| 15:00 | Break | |
| 15:15 | Q & A Session | The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence and Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister |
| 15:45 | Closing Remarks | The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence |

