



Veterans Affairs
Canada

Anciens Combattants
Canada

Speaking notes for

Notes d'allocution de

Walt Natynczyk

*Deputy Minister
Veterans Affairs Canada*

*Sous-ministre
Anciens Combattants Canada*

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Canada

[Greetings to Chair and Members], Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

I am accompanied today by Rick Christopher, acting Assistant Deputy Minister for Service Delivery and Sara Lantz, acting Chief Finance Officer and acting ADM of the Corporate Services Branch.

It is the role of Veterans Affairs Canada to serve all our Veterans. The Department supports the well-being of military and RCMP Veterans, CAF and RCMP members, and their families. We also promote recognition and remembrance of the achievements and sacrifices of all those who served Canada.

Currently, the Department provides well-being services and benefits to our 189,000 clients.

To meet the needs of today's Veterans, our programming has evolved. We take a holistic approach to maintaining the health and well-being of Veterans over their lifetimes. We define well-being as having a purpose, financial security, safe housing, good physical and mental health, suitable family support, integration into their community, and ensuring Veterans are proud of their identity and legacy.

Over the last two years, Veterans Affairs Canada has seen an increase of more than 60% in all disability applications; this includes an increase of more than 90% in first applications. Those applying for benefits could be new to the department, or are already receiving support for other conditions.

To support Veterans' needs, more than 93% of the Department's overall budget goes directly or indirectly to Veterans benefits. These expenditures include core programs, such as disability benefits, income replacement, rehabilitation benefits, caregiver recognition benefits, support services and more.

Consequently, a key departmental objective is to ensure that there are always sufficient funds in the budget to pay for those benefits or services.

Veterans Affairs has also responded to the increase in applications by simplifying and consolidating benefits, adding and training staff, integrating functions and digitizing the

decision making process. With a continuing backlog, however, we clearly still have some ways to go.

To expand on digitization, the Department offers an easy-to-use web portal, developed with input from Veterans, to make it easy for Veterans to get information on their own files, benefits, services and all other interactions. Called My VAC Account, we recently surpassed 100,000 Veterans, serving members and family users of this system.

To meet the increasing demands for processing applications for benefits and front-line staff, over the past four years the Department has hired close to 500 social workers, nurses, occupational therapists and administrators to provide services directly to Veterans and their families.

To enable enduring financial security for the ill and injured, the Government implemented the Pension for Life programs on April 1 of this year. These programs recognize and compensate Veterans for disabilities resulting from a service-related illness or injury.

To incentivize purpose in their lives, Veterans receiving the Income Replacement Benefit while on treatment or vocational rehabilitation training may choose to earn some income. Veterans are encouraged to earn up to \$20,000, which they can keep as additional income.

Veterans releasing from the Force with at least six years of service may also pursue education and training through a new benefit or seek civilian employment leveraging VAC's Career Transition Services Program.

Enhanced family programming provides recognition to the caregivers of the most seriously injured and enables families of medically released Veterans to have access to the Military Family Resource centers on all CAF bases.

Suitable housing is also key to the well-being of Veterans. Our view is that one homeless Veteran is too many. A Veteran Emergency Fund was created to assist Veterans in dire need. The Department works with a number of partners to prevent

homelessness and to find, to inform and to assist Veterans towards adequate shelter, treatment and so that they can find their new normal.

In addition to providing benefits, we have a duty to honour the service of Canada's Armed Forces. This is where our Commemoration Program plays an essential part of our mandate to support Veteran identity and well-being.

Over the past year, the Department commemorated the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the Battle of the Scheldt, and the delegation from the 75th anniversary of the Italian Campaign just returned home on Friday.

All of these activities serve to strengthen the connection from our distinguished Veterans to the youth of Canada, reinforcing the tradition of service in our nation.

With that context in mind, I will turn to the Supplementary Estimates.

First, it is important to understand that the Department's budget fluctuates each year due to the demand-driven nature of its programs and services. The client forecast is updated each year to ensure that all Veterans who come forward receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

However, expenses are only incurred for Veterans who in fact qualify and utilize VAC's programs and services to support their illness or injuries. Program budgets may only be used for the purpose for which they were intended, and not reallocated.

VAC's overall total planned spending this fiscal year (including these Supplementary Estimates) is approximately \$5.3 billion dollars. These Supplementary Estimates have increased the Department's current fiscal year budget by \$857.6 million dollars.

The increase in the Department's budget through these Supplementary Estimates is a direct result of the demand-driven nature of VAC's programs which is based on Veterans' needs and entitlements. We have experienced a significant demand for Pension for Life programs which is forming the largest portion of our Supplementary Estimates submission.

An increase in awareness campaigns for benefits, services and My VAC Account are a significant driver for the increase applications and more Veterans coming forward. It is reassuring to recognize that Veterans are more aware of the benefits they are entitled to receive.

Mr. Chair, members of the Canadian Armed Forces dedicate themselves to the safety and security of Canada. Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to honouring their service, commemorating their sacrifice, and supporting their well-being throughout their life after service.

We would be pleased to address any questions that you or other committee members may have about these Supplementary Estimates.

Thank you.