

Disability Decisions Wait Times

Issue

- Since 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada has seen an increase of more than 60% in disability applications, including an increase of more than 90% in first applications for disability benefits. As a result, as of September 2019, there are approximately 21,000 applications outside the 16-week service standard which are considered in the backlog.

Background

- In 2018-2019, the overall volume of disability benefit applications completed by the Department increased by 15%. However, these gains are being outpaced by the number of Veterans applying for disability benefits.
- An increase in awareness campaigns for benefits and services, and My VAC Account, the Department's online client system, appear to be significant drivers for the increase in disability benefit applications.
- In 2018-2019, Veterans Affairs Canada:
 - Used a first-in first-out model, adjudicating the oldest claims first
 - Processed more than 41,000 disability benefit applications
 - Processed more than 40% of initial disability applications through the streamlined decision-making models. The models allow for faster decisions on conditions which historically have had higher favourable rates.
- As of October 1 2019, there were **6,172** applications which were not ready for a decision. This means applications where we are waiting to receive supporting documents such as: proof of identity, information from the applicant's doctor (e.g. confirmed diagnosis, X-ray reports), etc. There were **38,492** applications ready and waiting for a VAC decision, of which **21,336** were waiting more than our 16-week service standard (considered backlog). The total number of pending applications was **44,664**.
- As of September 2019, the year to date wait times were: 39.5 weeks for first applications, 16 weeks for re-assessments and 21.5 weeks for departmental reviews.
- As of September 2019, approximately 21% of the overall pending disability applications were from still-serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Considerations

- Although additional staffing and numerous process improvements have enabled VAC to increase the number of disability claims processed, these actions had limited impact on the backlog of disability claims as the number of applications outpaced the increase in capacity.

Current Status / Next Steps

- Veterans Affairs Canada continues to streamline the disability benefits process, simplify the decision-making process for some medical conditions, and working with its partners to speed up access to service health records.
- In 2018-19, the Department hired new staff to process disability applications. However, it takes time for decision-makers to gain proficiency and they are not at full capacity yet.
- Veterans Affairs Canada is piloting a Veteran Benefit Team structure which groups all the resources required to process a disability application from beginning to end into one team. This reduces the duplication of effort and decreases delays.
 - From April to August 2019, the average turn-around time for first applications processed by the pilot team was 15 weeks, compared to 39 weeks for applications processed outside this model.
 - Some Veteran Benefit Teams have already been created. Full implementation is expected by March 2020.

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