Veterans Affairs Canada   Anciens Combattants Canada

Canada

Disability Decisions Wait Times

November 2019

OVERVIEW

— Since 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) has seen an increase of more than 60% in disability applications, this includes an increase of more than 90% in first applications.

— VAC continues to streamline the disability benefits application process, simplify the decision-making process for some medical conditions, and work with its partners to speed up access to service health records.

— It is important to remember that applications are fast tracked for those who are medically at risk or, have an immediate, unmet health need related to their claimed condition.

BACKGROUND

— Disability applications include first applications, reassessments (review as to whether the condition has worsened), and departmental reviews (review to confirm or change an original decision).

— As of October 1, 2019, VAC had approximately 44,000 pending applications. Of these, approximately 21,000 were older than the 16 week service standard (considered "backlog").

— In 2018-2019, the overall volume of disability benefit applications completed by the Department increased by 15%.

CURRENT STATUS

— In 2018-2019, VAC received almost 61,000 disability benefit applications and completed more than 41,000, representing VAC's best results for the last four years.

— Incoming applications continue to outpace the completion rate.

— As of September 2019, the year-to-date average wait times were: 39.5 weeks for first applications, 16 weeks for re-assessments and 21.5 weeks for departmental reviews.

— The Department is on track to receive approximately 67K applications this FY.

— As of September 2019, approximately 21% of the overall pending disability applications were from still-serving CAF members.

ACTIONS TAKEN

— Implementing a Veteran Benefit Teams structure which groups all the resources required to process a disability application from beginning to end into one team.

— Digitization of disability benefits applications which allows for faster file access and quicker searching of files.

— Diagnosis and Go

- Allows faster access to the diagnosis and medical information.
- Benefits Program Officers (decision makers) identify the diagnosis and key documents only, in preparation of a claim for adjudication.

— Evidence Informed Decision Model

- Simplifies processes and practices used to adjudicate on conditions which historically have had higher favourable rates.

CONSIDERATIONS

— Factors contributing to the backlog

- Enhancements to benefits and services resulting in more Veterans coming forward to get the help they need

- Increased awareness campaigns related to benefits, services and My VAC Account

- Simplified forms and improvements to the application process

— 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.

— 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.

RELATED PLATFORM COMMITMENT

— Simplify and shorten the process by moving forward with automatic approval for the most common disability applications.

NEXT STEPS: CRITICAL TIMELINES

— Implementation of the Veteran Benefit Teams (VBTs) structure began in November 2019. We currently have 5 VBTs , they are located in Montreal (2), Ottawa, Winnipeg and Charlottetown. Additional VBTs will be set up in early 2020 with full implementation by March 2020.

— Pilot direct access to the Canadian Forces Health Information System (CFHIS).
   — In many cases, this access will eliminate the time required to request and obtain paper health records.

— VAC is also developing/implementing 12 initiatives to reduce processing times. We are monitoring the impact of these initiatives over the next year, using 2019/2020 as a baseline year to identify how they affect workload and long-term staff requirements.

— VAC is seeking to retain our processing capacity gained through Budget 2018