



# Mental Health Supports & Services at Veterans Affairs Canada





## OVERVIEW

- The men and women who have served our country deserve to receive timely mental health support as needed.
- Veterans Affairs Canada funds a wide range of mental health services, supports and informational tools to assist Canadian Armed Forces Veterans, retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police members, and their families with the burdens of mental illness, when present, and with stress management as it relates to the transition to post-military life.
- Despite increased funding and staffing, not all Canadian Veterans in need of mental health support, however, are receiving timely or optimal mental health services.
- We need to ensure that every Veteran in need of mental health services and support receives the required help. This includes support for family members.



## **BACKGROUND**

- About 24% of Canadian Veterans released from service between 1998 and 2007 reported having a diagnosed mental health condition such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety.
  - Of those, 95% also had a chronic physical health condition.
- The [2017 Veteran Suicide Mortality Study](#), covering the period from 1976 to 2012, found:
  - A significantly higher risk of death by suicide in Canadian Veterans in comparison to the general population.
  - In comparison to the general population:
    - Male veterans had a 36% higher risk of death by suicide; and
    - Female veterans had an 81% higher risk of death by suicide.
- To address the problem of Veteran suicide, the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada launched a Joint Suicide Prevention Strategy on October 5, 2017 with department-specific action plans to reduce/eliminate suicidality where possible.
- The Veterans Affairs suicide prevention action plan includes continued funding to expand mental health services and supports for Veterans as needed.



## **BACKGROUND**

Mental health services and supports available through Veterans Affairs Canada include:

- Eleven **Operational Stress Injury Clinics** (10 out-patient and 1 in-patient) and 9 satellite sites that provide specialized, evidence-based, interdisciplinary assessment and treatment services for operational stress injuries.
  - The clinics are operated by the provinces but are funded by the department.
  - Services are provided to Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces members and Royal Canadian Mounted Police members.
- The **Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service** provides free access to 24/7 psychological support and referral services through a toll-free help line.
  - Veterans, former Royal Canadian Mounted Police members, their families and caregivers can receive up to 20 hours of psychological support per issue, face-to-face close to where they live or by telephone.
  - Bereavement support, referral services, and an online platform with mental health information, entitled **LifeSpeak**, is also available.
  - There are no eligibility requirements for these services.



## **BACKGROUND**

- The **Operational Stress Injury Social Support** Service offers confidential peer support to Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans and their families impacted by an operational stress injury.
  - The service has peer support coordinators, located in over 20 locations across Canada, who are familiar with both Veterans Affairs Canada services and community resources.
  - The service is offered in partnership with the Department of National Defence.
- Veterans Affairs Canada's **Case Management** is available for Veterans with complex needs.
- The **Canadian Veteran-specific Mental Health First Aid** service provides free mental health literacy training to Veterans, as well as, to the larger Veteran community.
- Families of medically released Veterans can also access the **Veteran Family Program** through one of the 32 Military Family Resource Centres located across Canada.
  - The program addresses the unique needs of medically released and releasing Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans and their families.
- The department has launched, in collaboration with various partners, several **free online and mobile applications on mental health conditions** and caregiving support for family members.



## CURRENT STATUS

- The well-being of all Canadian Veterans and their families remains our priority at Veterans Affairs Canada, yet an estimated 82 percent of the Veteran population does not engage with us.
- As of March 31, 2019, Veterans Affairs Canada was serving a total of 129,829 clients consisting of:
  - Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces members and former Royal Canadian Mounted Police members (excluding survivors).
    - Of these, 24% (31,151) were in receipt of a Veterans Affairs Canada Disability for a mental health condition.
      - Of these, 71% (22,109) were in receipt of a Veterans Affairs Canada Disability benefit due to a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.



## **RELATED PLATFORM COMMITMENT**

- To proactively reach out to every Canadian Veteran, Veterans Affairs Canada will create a new rapid-response team, consisting of social workers, case management counsellors and peer support workers who will:
  - Provide “on the spot” telephone mental health support and referral information for those in need of timely assistance;
  - Ensure Veterans’ awareness of mental health services available through Veterans Affairs Canada, and how to access these; and,
  - Encourage the creation of a My VAC Account by Veterans reached to facilitate future outreach.
- As well, the Government of Canada has committed to provide Veterans with up to \$3,000 in free counselling services before a disability claim is required.

## **CHALLENGES**

- The department does not have a mechanism for identifying and proactively contacting *all* Canadian Veterans.
- Scale of change for this initiative is significant as it involves extensive outreach with a large population (as of March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019 there were over 630,000 Veterans in Canada).



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