



Veterans Affairs
Canada

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Veterans and their Families

Platform Commitments and VAC Operating Context

November 2019

Briefing Objectives

1. Welcome and review list of **2019 platform commitments/priorities for Veterans** and their families.
2. [Recap]/Reflect on broad **Departmental Operating Context** and the specific context as it relates to each platform commitment.
 - The operating context will influence the scope and pace of platform commitment implementation
3. **Review issues/priorities from last mandate**
 - Veteran Survivor Fund
 - Afghanistan Monument
 - 2nd Center of Excellence for Chronic Pain
 - Pension for Life
 - Review of next steps (short term) for each
4. Confirm **immediate next steps**

See Annex A for Status of prior Mandate Commitments

Overall Liberal Party Commitment to Veterans

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Supporting Veterans and their Families

“Veterans have given years of their lives in service to others, driven by a profound sense of duty. So have their families. Both have earned our deep gratitude and respect. We will move forward to make sure that every veteran gets the help they need, and will support their families when they need it, too.”

-CHOOSE FORWARD: BUILDING A STRONGER CANADA, page 42

VETERANS AFFAIRS MISSION / FRAMEWORK

Care, Compassion and Respect

The Department is guided by 3 cornerstone values: Care, Compassion, and Respect where all activities are designed to put **Veterans and their dependents and survivors at the centre of our work.**

Well-Being Model

VAC's first core responsibility is to support the **care and well being** of Veterans and their dependents or survivors.

- VAC's **Well-Being framework** is based on 7 interdependent domains of well-being.

VAC Operating Context and Opportunities

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1 Important Partnership with Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)/ Department of National Defence (DND)

- Ongoing work: 'Close the Seam' (Budget 19 funding; Public Roadmap Aug 2019)
- Joint Steering Committee (VAC/CAF)
- Joint Suicide Prevention Strategy (Oct. 2017)
- Dual Ministerial role (Associate MND)

2 Demographic/Diversity of Veteran Experiences

- Currently, VAC serves 18% of all Veterans in Canada
- Average age of release now: 35 years of age
- Diversity of Veterans experiences/needs
 - Peacekeepers, RCMP, WWII, Korea, Afghanistan, female Veterans, Indigenous Veterans etc.
- No one authoritative Stakeholder voice that speaks for all groups of Veterans
- Identity, needs, how they wish to be commemorated vary

3 Strong public support for Veterans

- Canadians strongly believe that Veterans should be well cared for and that they are honoured
- Veteran stakeholders play a strong role in advocating for Veterans' rights, issues and remembrance activities
- Opportunity to better communicate the degree of VAC supports/services for Veterans and their families

4 Pressure for VAC to be 'all encompassing'

- VAC is often looked to address all Veteran needs.
- However, several levers are outside of VAC's authority
 - Health care: Provincial/Territorial jurisdiction;
 - Housing (CMHC), Homelessness and Employment: Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) is the lead for GC

5 Significant Volume of litigation

- *redacted*

6 Canada is an International leader

- Canada seen as a leader in supports/services for Veterans and in Commemoration
- Most countries trying to increase coherence of programming for Veterans

Veterans
and
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Current Issues and VAC Pressures (Internal/External)

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Hot Issues/ Media

1. Backlog/Wait times for Disability claims
2. *redacted*
3. *redacted*
4. *redacted*
5. Mental Health for Families *redacted*
6. Mefloquine – Alleged long-term effects of exposure to the anti-malaria drug
redacted

Program Pressures

1. Pension for Life *redacted*
2. *redacted*
3. *redacted*
4. VAC's Long Term Care evaluation called for renewed LTC Strategy by Dec 2019
 - VAC Long Term Care program/Veteran Independence Program/*redacted* all interlinked

Internal to VAC

1. *redacted*
2. VAC's diverse systems can hinder efficient use of real time data for continuous improvements & service excellence
3. Data dependencies for Veteran Service (i.e. info sharing with CAF/DND, including medical records and personnel data). Dependent on CAF health & service info.
4. VAC programming is demand driven / limitations with fenced financing (Quasi stat)

Mental Health Support: Rapid-Response Service

*Move forward with a **new rapid-response service** staffed by social workers, case management counsellors, and peer support workers and **proactively reach** out to every Canadian veteran to make sure that they know about the help available, and how to access it.*

Other Platform text: *Nearly two out of every five Veterans report some form of mental health challenge – nearly double the Canadian average – with depression, PTSD, and anxiety disorders the most commonly diagnosed issues. But today, only about 10 % of veterans who need mental health support get the help they need from VAC. That's not acceptable.*

- VAC clients with a Disability Benefit (PTSD diagnosis) grew from 13,076 in 2013/14 to **22,109 in 2018/2019**.
 - VAC's approval rate for PTSD claims is currently **97%**.
- 20% of Veterans who served in Iraq/Afghanistan suffer from either major depression or PTSD
 - Currently, some applications pertaining to mental health are triaged/fast tracked (if unmet health needs).
- VAC currently serves 116,693 (18% of the overall Veteran population), as such, this initiative will require cooperation with partners to ensure every Canadian Veteran is aware of available supports (per commitment).

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Platform Commitment #2

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Pertinent Context / Key Facts

Disability Benefits: **\$3,000 in Free Counselling Services**

*To help ease the stigma that many may feel about starting a disability claim, and to make sure that every veteran gets the help they need, we will give our veterans **up to \$3,000 in free counselling services** before a disability claim is required.*

This will give Veterans in need of help nearly six months of free support, provided directly by VAC or one of its service partners, and will help as many as 20,000 veterans each year.

Current VAC programming (counselling services):

- Irrespective of whether a Veteran has submitted an application for disability benefits, VAC currently offers certain counselling services/benefits, each with detailed eligibility criteria:
 - **VAC Assistance Services** (confidential short term mental health services at no charge and community referrals as required);
 - **Operational Stress Injury Clinics** and **Satellite services**
 - **Program of Choice 12 (Mental Health)** – Currently, VAC Treatment Benefits are tied to a Disability Benefit entitlement; some 4,000 providers are registered with Medavie
- As of Feb 1, 2019, VAC considers Canadian Certified Counsellors as mental health providers, likely enabling more Veterans to access counseling and support services.
- Any new counselling service would be open to all Veterans (not only VAC clients)
- *redacted*

Talk to a Professional Now provides up to 20 hours per issue of confidential support (24/7)

Platform Commitment #3

Pertinent Context / Key Facts

Disability Benefits: Automatic Approval of Common Applications

We will make it easier for Veterans to get disability benefits....

*To simplify and shorten the process (of applying for benefits), we will move forward with **automatic approval for the most common disability applications**, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and arthritis, among others.*

	2018/19 Most Common Medical Conditions (First Applications)	Favourable Decisions # (%)	# Most Common Decisions
1.	Tinnitus	5,447 (81%)	6,726
2.	Hearing Loss	3,537 (58%)	6,139
3.	PTSD	2,373 (97%)	2,440
4.	Arthrosis of Knee	721 (86%)	842
5.	Osteoarthritis Knee	671 (94%)	781
6.	Depressive Disorder	676 (94%)	721
7.	Lumbar Disc Disease	561 (89%)	629
8.	Osteoarthritis Hip	504 (82%)	617
9.	Cervical Disc Disease	487 (84%)	578
10.	Facet Joint Syndrome	444 (88%)	506
Total Most Common Decisions (2018/19)			19,979
All DP/DA Decisions (2018/19)			34,540

See Annex B for Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB) top conditions and incidence

- 10 most common medical conditions represent **58 % of all** Disability Award/Disability Pension first application decisions (2018/19).
 - 'Favourable decisions rates' are relatively high for all ten conditions, except hearing loss at 58% (see chart to left).
- In 2018/19, there were 8,463 first application conditions with unfavourable decisions.
- *redacted*

Platform Commitments #4 and #5

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Support for Families: Employment and Training Support

We will help families settle in when duty forces them to relocate.

*Every year, about 10,000 members of the CAF and RCMP are relocated, along with their families to work in a different part of Canada....To help family members more easily adjust to their new homes, we will move forward with a **national employment and training support service (#4)**. This service will provide career counselling, job matching, and other employment help tailored to the unique needs of military and policing families.*

We will also give families a tax-free \$2,500 benefit every time they relocate, to help with retraining, recertification, and other costs of finding new work (#5)

Pertinent Context / Key Facts

- **DND led commitments, however co-ordination with VAC & RCMP on #4 important**
- Each year, 12,000 military (9500) and RCMP (1800) spouses are required to relocate. Approx. 9,000 of which must move to a new province or territory.

RELEVANT RESEARCH TO SUPPORT GAP:

- CAF Relocation Study (Manser, 2018): Military spouses indicate that online career counselling services (12%) and a spousal employment network (31%) would be two of the most useful services for their respective career development, along with financial support for continuing education and training (27%).
- 43% of respondents in 2016 CAF Community Needs Assessment indicated financial problems. 22% identified difficulties finding suitable employment for the non-military spouse (Prairie Research Associates, 2017a).

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Platform Commitment #6

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Pertinent Context / Key Facts

Homeless Veterans

*Every year, about 3,000 veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP use the services of an emergency shelter. After their dedicated and selfless service to our country, Canadians can all agree: one homeless veteran is one too many. To address veterans' homelessness, we will move forward with **building new, purpose-built accessible and affordable housing units**, with a full range of health, social, and employment supports for veterans who need extra help (\$15 million a year).*

RECENT GC INVESTMENT/APPROACHES

- As ESDC is federal lead for Homelessness, ESDC could lead on this commitment.
- In June 2018, VAC hosted a successful Veterans Homelessness Roundtable. A comprehensive map of resources across Canada was published Feb. 14, 2019: [Veterans Homelessness Support Map](#)
- In July 2019, the GC awarded VETS Canada \$840,000 to support operations/continue its *A Beacon of Hope* program, which provides support for homeless Veterans.
- VAC's Veteran and Family Well-Being Fund provides grants and contributions to select private, public or academic organizations to support research, initiatives and projects that encourage or enhance the well-being of the Veteran community.
 - Recent funding example: GC is contributing 50% of Canada's first home designed specifically for homeless Veterans. The **Multifaith Housing Initiative** is building a 40-unit home for military veterans struggling with homelessness at the former Canadian Forces Base Rockcliffe, Ottawa, Ontario.

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Ongoing Initiatives: Last Mandate

Veteran Survivor Fund (VSF)

WHAT: VETERAN SURVIVOR FUND (VSF)

To better support surviving spouses of Veterans who married over the age of 60, Budget 2019 announced \$150 million over 5 years starting in 2019 to create a new Veterans Survivors Fund.

- *With these funds, the GC will work with the community to identify impacted survivors, process their claims and ensure survivors have the financial support they need. Additional details on this measure will be announced in the coming months.*

STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

- VSF is not well aligned with former mandate letter to eliminate Marriage after 60 Clause (CAF Superannuation Act).
- Criticism of time bound nature of fund: 5 years only
- Royal Canadian Legion: “stopgap getting around the issue and I wouldn’t give the mandate letter a check on this one”
- National Council of Veteran’s Associations (NCVA): “NCVA and Veteran stakeholders in general are perplexed at the nature and scope of this budgetary provision...the Veterans’ community has been seeking a specific amendment to the Canadian Forces Superannuation Act...there is no need to reinvent the wheel when a solution exists.”

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Green Party platform:

Repeal the section of the **Superannuation Act** that denies pensions to surviving spouses of certain workers, including RCMP and veterans, who married after 60.

Afghanistan Monument

WHAT: AFGHANISTAN MONUMENT:

Since 2014, the GC has consistently expressed its intention to build a monument to commemorate Canada's mission in Afghanistan. The monument will recognize the commitment and sacrifice of Canadians who served in Afghanistan, as well as the support provided to them by Canadians at home.

STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

- Veterans of the mission, families of the Fallen, and other whole-of-Government mission participants are expected to remain very interested and engaged in the monument development process.
- Indigenous peoples are also to be engaged; the Algonquin Anishinabeg were, and will continue to be, consulted as the local Indigenous group.

STATUS/MILESTONES

- Budget 2014 announced \$5M for the construction of the monument. VAC, as proponent, is funding the initiative.
- June 20, 2019, the National Capital Commission (NCC) Board of Directors granted federal land use approval for a site east of the Canadian War Museum on LeBreton Flats as the Monument location.
- August 2019: VAC created a web page inviting the public to share views; Canadian Heritage, the project manager launched the first phase of the design competition (Request for Qualifications).

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Ongoing Initiatives: Last Mandate (cont.)

2nd Center of Excellence (Chronic Pain)

WHAT: 2ND CENTER OF EXCELLENCE (CHRONIC PAIN):

- Budget 2019 invested \$18.4 million over five years, starting in 2019-20, with \$4.66 million per year ongoing, to create and operate the Centre of Excellence on Chronic Pain.
- In July 2019, the GC announced that McMaster University (Michael G. DeGroote National Pain Centre and Michael G. DeGroote Institute for Pain Research and Care or IPRC), would stand up the Centre of Excellence on Chronic Pain.

RELEVANT RESEARCH/STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

- VAC's 2016 Life After Service Survey (LASS) found the incidence of chronic pain among Veterans (41%) was almost double that of comparable Canadians (22%). Of the Veterans who reported chronic pain, most attributed the condition to their military service.
 - Chronic pain is a factor in Veteran mental health problems and suicides.
 - Chronic pain is unique and challenging to treat, requiring interdisciplinary attention to complex biological, psychological and social factors.
- Academic research is needed to inform our understanding of chronic pain as it affects Veterans.
- The Royal Canadian Legion (RCL) expressed their optimism for the new Centre of Excellence on Chronic Pain.

STATUS/MILESTONES

- Order In Council approved by the Governor in Council in July 2019.
- Public announcement by MVA July 29 2019 (Hamilton, Ontario).

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Pension for Life (PFL)

WHAT: Pension for Life

- Pension for Life is a combination of benefits that provide recognition, income support and stability to members and Veterans who experience a service-related illness or injury.
- The Pension for Life programs empower Veterans and CAF members living with a service-related injury and/or illness to determine the form of compensation that works best for them and their families.
- The Pension for Life benefit package includes: Pain and Suffering Compensation, Additional Pain and Suffering Compensation, and Income Replacement Benefit.

STAKEHOLDER VIEWS/STATEMENT

- Based on analysis of departmental social media channels, the average sentiment for PFL related content is 28% positive, 45% neutral, and 27% negative.
- In Feb. 2019, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) released a report projecting that while 95% of Veterans would be better off under PFL, 3% of future applicants could be “greatly disadvantaged” under PFL.
- In May 2019, Prime Minister committed to ensure that, “every injured Veteran is better off under our new system than they were under the old one.... in every single case.”

STATUS/MILESTONES

- On April 1, 2019 the Pension for Life benefits came into effect.
- ~80K clients were successfully transferred to the new PFL benefits from existing benefits.
- Service improvements to Veterans and members include guided web forms, enhanced status tracking, and My VAC Account streamlining.

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Immediate Next Steps

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VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA MANDATE LETTER COMMITMENTS: END OF MANDATE STATUS

ANNEX A

MLCs Actions taken, progress made: (4 of 21 -- 19%)

MLC 15 – Streamline the suite of benefits, improve transparency and communications, and improve the experience of Veterans as their needs change throughout their lives (Income Replacement Benefit)

MLC 17 – Deliver a higher standard of service and care, and ensure that a ‘One Veteran, One Standard’ approach is upheld

MLC 18 – 1st Centre of Excellence (PTSD & Mental Health), and 2nd Centre of Excellence (Chronic Pain per B19 proposal)

MLC 20 - Eliminate the Marriage after 60 clawback clause

Other GC Commitments involving VAC or Veterans more broadly (Not included in VAC Departmental totals)

- Develop a strategy that aims to create a single online window for all government services (TBS Lead)
- Implement an Infrastructure Strategy that improves social infrastructure.
- Establish new performance standards for government services and measure and report on performance.
- Work with the Métis Nation to advance reconciliation/renew relationship

Completed MLCs (16 of 21 -- 76%)

MLC 2 – Increase the Disability Award

MLC 3 – Expand access to Permanent Impairment Allowance

MLC 4 – Provide injured Veterans with 90% of pre-release salary (ELB)

MLC 5 – New Veterans Education Benefit

MLC 6 – Re-open nine VAC service offices

MLC 7 – Implement all of the OAG’s recommendations on enhancing Mental Health service delivery

MLC 8 – Greater support for families providing care to Veterans with physical and/or mental health issues

MLC 9– End the time limit for surviving spouses to apply for voc rehab

MLC 10 – Double funding to the Last Post Fund

MLC 11 – Improve Career Transition Services

MLC 12 – New Caregiver Recognition Benefit

MLC 13 –Veteran Emergency Fund and Veteran & Family Well-being Fund

MLC 14 – Help injured Veterans by re-establishing lifelong pensions and ensuring that they all have access to financial advice and support

MLC 16 - Improved Career and Vocational Assistance by ensuring Veterans are included in Community Benefits Agreements for federal infrastructure projects (Infrastructure Lead)

MLC 19– Increase the Veteran’s Survivor’s Pension amount from 50 to 70%

MLC 21 – Joint Suicide Prevention Strategy w/ DND

Actions Taken, Progress Made Toward Ongoing Goal (1 of 21 -- 5%):

MLC 1 - Reduce Complexity/Strengthen Partnerships: DND and VAC (“Closing Seam”) – Commitment of public roadmap with milestones fulfilled (Jan 2019).

VRAB Facts and Figures

ANNEX B

Veterans Review and Appeal Board Disability Benefits:

In 2017-18, 44% of review decisions and 29% of appeal decisions resulted in the Veteran receiving more Benefits.

The Board hears more cases about lower back conditions than any other disability.

- *Other common medical conditions include tinnitus, hearing loss, PTSD, knee and neck conditions.*

2017/18 Top 6 Medical Conditions <u>at Review</u>		# of Hearings
1.	Tinnitus	269
2.	Lower Back Conditions	246
3.	Hearing Loss	212
4.	PTSD	150
5.	Knee Conditions	132
6.	Neck Conditions	100

2017/18 Top 6 Medical Conditions <u>at Appeal</u>		# of Hearings
1.	Lower Back Conditions	66
2.	Knee Conditions	38
3.	PTSD	36
4.	Hearing Loss	29
5.	Tinnitus	27
6.	Neck Conditions	26

- In any given year, 6-9% of Veterans appeal their VAC disability benefits decisions to the Board ... [about a] quarter relate to assessment of entitled disabilities. – VRAB
 - In 2017-18 the number of decisions reviewed by VRAB was 5.5% of VAC disability benefit decisions.
 - VRAB Review decisions have continued to decline since 2013/14

Fiscal Year	VAC decisions*	VRAB Review decisions	As a % of VAC's previous year decisions
2017- 18	35,949	2,017	5.5%
2016- 17	36,502	2,219	6.0%
2015- 16	37,004	2,507	8.5%
2014- 15	29,480	2,729	8.3%
2013- 14	32,963	3,213	9.1%