

VETERANS
AFFAIRS
CANADA



2023 Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans Forum

LISTENING, LEARNING, AND TAKING INFORMED ACTION ON EQUITY GOALS.

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Veterans Affairs Canada is advancing gender equality, diversity, and inclusion for women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans through identifying and addressing systemic barriers and inequities. Issues facing these populations might include barriers and inequities related to sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation of equity-deserving groups.

The Department integrates Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) into its programs and policies to advance gender equality, respect diversity, and promote inclusion for all Veterans by recognizing the different impacts of policies, programs and services based on gender identity and expression, biological sex, and/or sexual orientation, as well as intersecting identity factors, such as age, disability, Indigeneity, race/ethnicity, religion, and language.

“Women Veterans” was used during the forum to allow for discussions about gender and sociocultural differences and identities in addition to sex differences (i.e., a person’s biological and physiological characteristics). The term “Female Veterans” was also used in this forum as some research conducted speaks specifically to sex differences. The Forum used the term “2SLGBTQI+” as an acronym, in line with the Government of Canada to refer to the Canadian sexual and gender-diverse community.





A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAMPION OF WOMEN VETERANS' HEALTH

During the 2023 Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans Forum, many of you encouraged the Department to designate a Champion for Women Veterans. I was proud to participate in the Forum and to hear from and engage with fellow women Veterans, 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans, advocates, and stakeholders.

I am very honoured to have been asked by the Deputy Minister to be the Champion for Women Veterans' Health. As a women Veteran myself and the Chief Medical Officer and Director General of Health Professionals for Veterans Affairs, the issues you face, particularly in health equity are particularly important to me.

Together we will continue to work to build a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable space for all Veterans, service members, equity-deserving Veteran populations.

As your new Champion, I am pleased to share the summary of our conversations and action items from the 2023 Forum. The discussion and action items contained in this report will help promote an institution-wide culture of freedom and respect for service members and Veterans including Women Veterans and those from the 2SLGBTQI+ Veteran community.

I look forward to serving as your Champion and to future opportunities to connect with the communities we serve.

Sincerely,

Cyd Courchesne



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 9 and 16 February 2023, the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, then Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, hosted the third Forum for Women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans. Over two days, the Minister met with representatives from the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), stakeholder organizations, members of minister's advisory groups, subject matter experts and government officials.

Over 280 attendees joined the event online and in person, including representatives from:

- 5 national Veteran organizations
- 4 federal government departments
- 2 Centres of Excellence
- 2 Indigenous partners
- 4 partners with the 2SLGBTQI+ community
- 4 Women Veteran community partners
- 5 partners working to address Military Sexual Misconduct and Trauma

Central themes raised at the 2023 Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans' Forum included:

- **strengthening an inclusive, intersectional GBA Plus mindset within Veterans Affairs and CAF/DND,**
- **including marginalized and underserved voices with lived experience** in the design, development, and evaluation of programs, policies, services, and commemorations, and
- continuing to lead on concrete actions towards a more equitable future for all Veterans.

The Forum was held in two sessions: a virtual session on 9 February 2023 and an in person/hybrid session in Ottawa on 16 February 2023. For more information on the presentations, please see enclosed annexes and [visit our website to see clips from the Forum.](#)



FORUM WELCOME

The Minister's welcome

The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay spoke about the successes, opportunities and challenges facing the Department and Canada's Veteran support system. The Minister's address covered:

- the importance of connecting with the community through the Forum,
- acknowledging the vital role played by Women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans,
- the vital role the Department plays as part of the broader Veteran support system,
- resources to address processing times,
- mental health supports, and
- equitable outcomes for all Veterans.

The Minister recognized the work of the stakeholders in the room in advancing the well-being of women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans, including Canadian Armed Forces Veterans and released members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.



DAY 1: 9 FEBRUARY 2023

Setting the stage: Research presentation

Panelists:

- Nathan Svenson, Veterans Affairs Canada (Research Presenter)
- Faith McIntyre, Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- Major General Lise Bourgon, Acting Commander of Military Personnel and Canadian Armed Forces and Department of National Defence Champion for Women
- Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister of Service Delivery

During the presentation, the panelists shared the results of the 2021 Census with participants. The data collected through the Census provides the Department with greater insight into the Veteran population, including those who identify as women, transgender, and non-binary; as well as Veterans who identify as First Nations, Inuit, and Metis.

The session shared information about a new data collection study: the Canadian Veteran Health Survey. Launched in Fall 2022, the survey includes detailed questions on sexual orientation, Indigenous identity (First Nations, Inuit, Metis), and women's health, including sex-specific conditions, reproductive health, and maternal health.

Following the presentation, panelists were invited to speak to a changing understanding of who is a Veteran and the work undertaken since the 2019 Forum. Key themes in the discussion included:

- DND/CAF progressed towards inclusion, culture, and equity goals. They are working to understand and address the systemic bias against historically marginalized groups, including women, 2SLGBTQI+ and racialized serving members. Achievements to date include:
 - standing up the Chief Professional Conduct and Culture as the centre of expertise to ensure professional conduct within the Defence culture meets the standards expected of the profession, and
 - implementing a new inclusive leadership behavior where leaders within the CAF are evaluated on their abilities to be inclusive.



- Veterans Affairs shared new opportunities to understand the experiences and needs of equity-deserving and historically marginalized Veterans, including:
 - reviewing the Department's older programs and complete a gender-based analysis review to ensure equal outcomes for all Veterans,
 - a thorough review of medical conditions to ensure our adjudicative teams understand how common illnesses and injuries present differently in men and woman so we can improve decision making and ensure the appropriate treatments are in place.

Veterans with lived experience

Panelists:

- Shannon Hartigan, Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- RCAF Logistics Officer Christine Wood (Ret'd)
- LCol Steven P. Deschamps CD (Ret'd)
- Martine Roy, President of the LGBT Purge Fund
- Col Telah Morrison, OMM, CD, MA (Ret'd)

The virtual panel brought together Veterans with lived experience to discuss their identities and how the Government of Canada might recognize their diversity. Panelists spoke about the existing gaps and opportunities to include Veteran voices of lived experience. Key takeaways included:

- Panelists called for the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans to have an expanded focus that is inclusive of all marginalized Veteran groups, in particular recognizing the cultural needs of two-spirit Veterans, as well as First Nations, Inuit, Metis, Black and racialized Veterans when addressing the needs of marginalized Veterans.
- Panelists called for the Department to diversify and enhance ways we engage and include Veterans, addressing gender biases and providing individually focused, trauma-informed research, care, and support for women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans.



Following the presentation, virtual forum audience members were invited to reflect on progress and goals through a virtual engagement. Key themes in the discussion include:

- The Department has made progress collaborating with key stakeholders from women Veteran and 2SLGBTQI+ Veteran communities, but there is still more work to do to progress equity goals.
- Women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans experience multiple, sometimes overlapping systemic barriers, with many rooted in a lack of understanding or bias regarding their military history and experiences.

Veterans in their own words

Featured Presenters:

- Captain (Ret'd) H el ene Le Scelleur
- Lieutenant (Ret'd) (N) Anik Desrochers
- Todd Ross, Rainbow Veterans of Canada
- LCdr (Ret'd) Rosemary Park
- Jane Hall (Ret'd RCMP)

Veterans with lived experience shared written statements and videos that discussed why it is important for the Department, researchers, service providers, and the public to respect that gender, age, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, Indigeneity, service type, release type, and experiences in their service play a significant role in their needs.

Highlights of those stories include:

“To me, [my military service] was a positive experience, and so as a Veteran, I sometimes struggle with my own identity. It's to the point where my partner has to remind me of the various benefits that we are allowed to have or that we benefit from as a Veteran in terms of recognition. And so, sometimes I forget that I'm a Veteran because I don't consider myself worthy enough. Whether that be, I didn't go on any deployments, I went through my training and changed occupations and did the best of my ability, but I don't have any medals besides the CD. And so, to me, it is challenging to consider myself as a woman Veteran, and I think that's important that this struggle, is real.”



“When I was released [as part of the LGBT Purge] in 1990, it was an honourable discharge. However, I was told at the time that I would never be seen as a Veteran, I was not a Veteran, and that I should not approach Veterans Affairs. It took a long time, one, because I felt that even though it was an honourable discharge, I didn’t feel any honour in my release. And it wasn’t until I was working with a Métis elder, who was also a Veteran, and he approached me and said, I understand you served, and I said, yes, but there’s a lot to it. And so, I explained to him some of the circumstances and how I didn’t feel that I was a Veteran and didn’t feel that I had the right to call myself a Veteran, and he immediately stopped me and said, a Veteran is a Veteran is a Veteran. And so, it was through the Métis Nation of Ontario Veterans Council that I first started to identify as a Veteran.”

“What’s important for me today as a Veteran is that we talk about the history of modern Veterans, something that has often been overlooked. We need to make sure that the stories stand out, reach our young people, reach people who don’t know what it mean to be a Veteran who served in today’s Canadian Armed Forces. Today, you can serve overseas, you can serve at home and it’s important to tell the story of everything that goes on in a career of a CAF member.”

“For those first few days and weeks of recruit field training with the RCMP, I stayed comfortably in the background of my male counterparts. Complainants were comfortable talking to men. When they called the police, they expected a male officer to arrive. There were a few puzzled glances cast my way, but overall I remained quite invisible. I was not even close to the public’s perception of a Mountie; I was small and female, and though I was twenty-three, I looked like a teenager.”



DAY 2: 16 FEBRUARY 2023

Intersectionality and the Veteran experience

Panelists:

- Lieutenant-Colonel Christine Hutchins (Ret'd), Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- Sergeant Joan Buchanan (Ret'd)
- Captain Tarik Kadri (Ret'd)
- Major Kathryn Foss (Ret'd)
- Lynne Gouliquer PhD (Ret'd)

This panel discussion with equity-deserving Veterans aimed to uplift the experiences of Veterans facing multiple marginalizations, a concept rooted in the feminist theory of intersectionality. The discussion focused on how individuals may face multiple layers of discrimination (misogyny, racism, homophobia, colonialism, transphobia, ageism, and other prejudices) – which can overlap and result in harmful assumptions, systemic barriers, and specific, urgent needs.

Highlights of the panel discussion included:

- “Diversity is a fact; inclusion is a choice” – the federal government needs to ensure they are implementing cultural change by creating and upholding the policies, procedures, practices, and behavioural changes that make sustainable inclusion.
- “Diversity is an operational imperative” – the voices of Veterans with diverse lived experiences need to be reflected in decision-making as a consistent, inclusive, and forward-thinking force for change.
- To positively transform and create programs, services, benefits and recognition, the Department must examine the foundations and culture of their organizations to understand and confront the biases that informed past decisions.



Service Delivery - Partners in serving Veterans

Panelists:

- Maryse Savoie, Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- MCpl Natacha Dupuis (Ret'd), Peer Support Coordinator (OSSIS)
- Patti Parkyn, RN BSN, Field Nursing Services Officer, Veterans Affairs Canada
- Beverly (Bev) Martin, Area Director, Veterans Affairs Canada

This panel discussion focused on the evolving practices of collaborative partnerships to meet the needs of equity-deserving Veterans. Highlights of this discussion included:

- Still serving members and Veterans are in the best position to determine their needs; to address inequity and support their health outcomes, DND/CAF and the Department need to understand the clinical needs, military influences, cultural supports, and health risks of equity-deserving groups.
- While progress has been made to address the gender and cultural-specific needs of Veterans, more work needs to be done to address the gaps in service benefits and treatment modalities to ensure they meet the needs of equity-deserving Veteran communities.
- Equity, inclusion, and addressing systemic barriers is the work of every person. It can be supported by championing training on inclusion, unconscious bias, the history of equity-deserving groups, and working across cultures.



Community partnerships

Panelists:

- Nathan Svenson, Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- Dr. Erin Kinsey, USAF Sgt (Ret'd) from Women Warriors Healing Gardens,
- Rosemary Park, LCdr (Ret'd) from Servicewomen's Salute
- Kareth Huber, (Ret'd) from Rainbow Veterans of Canada

Community partners are an extension of the Veteran service community who meet the unique needs of equity-deserving Veterans, including Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans. Highlights of the discussion included:

- **Education:** Public servants need more education on the historical realities of discrimination, prejudice, and violence. An increased understanding of the history and impact that the LGBT Purge had on Veterans can help shape the behavioural changes needed to rebuild trust with 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans.
- **Recognition:** Storytelling is a critical part of recognizing the service and sacrifice of equity-deserving Veterans, including women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans.
- **Connection:** More funding is needed for organizations that speak to the needs of equity-deserving and historically marginalized Veterans and create safe spaces for Veterans.

Data, information, and wisdom

Panelists:

- Mitch Freeman, Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- Kathy Grant, Historian with the Our Legacy Voices project
- Stacey Silins, Scientific Advisor for the Restorative Engagement Program
- Lisa Garland Baird, Senior Researcher with Veterans Affairs Research Division

The panel opened with a discussion on the importance of disaggregated data to highlight the unique needs of equity-deserving Veterans, as well as the importance of centring the voices of Veterans with lived experience in qualitative and quantitative research, data, and commemorations. Highlights of the discussion included:



- To build trust, we must put people with lived experience in opportunities to influence research, policies, programs, and commemorations without the risk of them feeling tokenized.
- For many Veterans, employees of federal institutions represent an organization that has harmed them. Trust-building takes time and cannot be forced. It requires honesty, vulnerability, and transparency.
- The path towards equity isn't a straight path, we may make mistakes but we will learn as we go. What is important is that we listen, confront our own biases, and build trust together.

Panel on health equity and equity deserving groups

Panelists:

- Dr. Cyd Courchesne Captain(N) (Ret'd), Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- Col Helen Wright CD, MD, MSc, MPH, CCFP, ABPM from the Canadian Armed Forces Health Services Group
- Sébastien Perigny-Lajoie, Entitlement Eligibility Guideline (EEG) and Table of Disability (ToD) Modernization Coordinator
- Jacqueline Smith, Veterans Affairs Business Intelligence Unit

This panel focused on the ongoing work to meet health equity needs. For the purposes of the panel, “health equity” was defined as not just having access to healthcare, but having access to the healthcare you need based on your identity and your diversity. Highlights of the discussion included:

- There is a difference between ‘equal’ and ‘equitable’ healthcare. Health equity requires institutions to develop a greater understanding of the impacts of different military careers, cultures, and operational and administrative demands for serving members and Veterans from different genders and lived experiences.
- The Canadian Veteran population has a rich and vast complexity, and the ethical collection and use of demographic information about serving members and Veterans will support the equitable treatment of Veterans and their families.
- Health equity challenges are often not straightforward and need good evidence to understand the barriers, as well as the inclusion of the voices of lived experience to resolve.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Participants:

- Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister of Service Delivery, Veterans Affairs Canada (Moderator)
- Amy Meunier, Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Commemoration, Veterans Affairs Canada
- Commodore Daniel Bouchard, Commander of the Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group
- Dr. Cyd Courchesne, Captain(N) (Ret'd), Director General of Health Professional Services, Veterans Affairs Canada

The final panel of the Forum was asked to outline their learnings throughout the Forum and where the Department and DND/CAF go from here. Senior Leaders committed to the following efforts in support of equity:

- Investments in the CAF's Chief Professional Conduct and Culture to provide the tools and training to evolve the culture within CAF.
- VAC and CAF will continue to fund research and collaborate with the Department, Veterans, and serving members to ensure they are included in the decision-making process.
- Canadian Armed Forces Transition Services will strengthen their Military Transition, Engagement and Partnerships Program to put in place the resources needed to successfully transition, including the development of an easy-to-use tool and transition plan.
- Veterans Affairs Health Professionals will continue the conversation with equity-deserving and historically marginalized Veterans and share their stories to inform the journey toward equity.
- Veterans Affairs Commemoration and Public Affairs Division will strengthen story-telling content and produce learning materials that create space to recognize diverse needs and honour diverse histories.
- Veterans Affairs Service Delivery will make the physical spaces that Veterans use (including area offices and clinics) safe and welcoming spaces that respond to Veterans' needs, drawing on the expertise of Veteran advocates and Veterans with lived experience to inform the development of physically welcoming and safe spaces.



- Veterans Affairs Service Delivery will address barriers to the collection of Veteran demographic identity factors by expanding the inclusivity of National Satisfaction Survey questions in the future.
- Veterans Affairs Commemoration and Public Affairs Division will increase opportunities in its commemorative activities to include marginalized and equity-deserving Veterans.

The Minister's closing remarks

The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay thanked participants for sharing their lived experiences and continued engagement. The Minister emphasized the importance of the Forum, hearing from Veterans with lived experiences from equity-deserving groups and that the stories and ideas shared that would improve the policies, programs, and services of Veterans Affairs.

“Without action, nothing changes”

- Minister of Veterans Affairs

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FORUM

The high-level recommendations presented in this document were gathered from discussions which occurred before, during and after the forum, including through a post-forum evaluation survey; as well as the feedback sessions with Veterans and staff held throughout the development, delivery, and evaluation of the event.



NEXT STEPS

Table A: Suggestions received from Forum Stakeholders and Attendees

- Expand the focus of the women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans team so that it is inclusive of all marginalized Veteran groups.
- Establish a dedicated group to work towards equitable health outcomes for the groups that are the most underserved.
- Increase engagements with equity-deserving Veterans, including women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans, especially LGBT Purge survivors, to allow them to shape the policies, programs, and events that serve them (including the Forum).
- Continue to fund organizations that support women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans to implement programs to address their unique needs.
- Increase opportunities for equity-deserving Veterans to have their voices heard, for example, a Women Advisory Group.
- Increase training for staff on equity, cultural competency, intersectionality, and for historical events (LGBT Purge) impacting equity deserving Veterans.
- Continue to modernize the Table of Disabilities (ToD) and Entitlement Eligibility Guidelines (EEGs).
- Create safe and welcoming physical spaces that Veterans use (including Area offices and clinics).
- Increase communication and advertising to raise awareness of programs and services.
- Increase Veterans from equity-deserving groups (women, 2SLGBTQI+, BIPOC) working at the Department.
- Leverage research from Five-Eyes countries to align services and support to Canadian underserved Veterans.
- Increase funding for research on women Veterans and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans.
- Increase Publish GBA+ analysis on programs and policies.
- Increase the promotion of community partners with programs that support equity-deserving Veterans.
- Increase storytelling and sharing of equity-deserving Veterans' stories.



FORUM EVALUATION

Participants had the opportunity to complete a Forum Evaluation Survey to provide their feedback on their Forum experience. Of the evaluation respondents:

- **87.6%** of feedback was positive or neutral
- **93%** of feedback on the forum elements was positive
- Of the positive feedback, many felt as though the Forum:
 - exceeded their expectations.
 - was highly informative.
 - uplifted the voices of equity-deserving Veterans; and
 - demonstrated the diversity of Veterans.

Voices of participants from the 2023 Forum

“The testimonials of the panelists drove the message of inclusion and the need for safe spaces for everyone, especially those marginalized as a result of their gender or race.”

“Would like to see continuous reporting on changes or initiatives that come out of this Forum - talk is great, but action is needed.”

« J'apprécie les témoignages et le résumé des mesures prises par ACC, en particulier les exemples concrets. »

“I appreciated the opportunity to hear from people with lived experience. This is the best way for people who influence policy and services to understand the challenges faced by this community.”