

Delivering Service Excellence

A Review of Veterans Affairs Canada's
Service Delivery Model

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Veterans Affairs
Canada

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DELIVERING SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Introduction

Veterans and their families have earned the respect and gratitude of all Canadians, and the Government of Canada places the highest priority on making sure they have the support and services they need, when and where they need them.

This was clear when the Prime Minister presented the Minister of Veterans Affairs with a challenging mandate back in November 2015: from improving Veterans' financial support and reopening offices, to streamlining the transition from military to civilian life and overhauling how the Department's services are delivered.

The Minister is unequivocal in his desire to fulfill his mandate and ensure that Veterans and their families receive the respect, support, care and economic opportunities they deserve. He and the Department have been working hard to deliver on these priorities, and an essential step was to undertake a comprehensive review of how services are delivered.

He noted recently: "I believe this review is an important step in making it easier for Veterans and their families to understand and access programs and services. They have earned our respect and gratitude. And as the Minister of Veterans Affairs, I will ensure that we continue to honour their service to our great nation."

While progress is being made in many areas, including increasing financial support and delivering a higher standard of service and care with the hiring of more than 370 new staff as of January 2017, a review of how the department delivers services shows that wholesale change is needed. Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) is committed to implementing the changes that will help Veterans succeed in their transition to civilian life.

The service delivery review and its findings will help shape VAC's more holistic and comprehensive approach to Veteran well-being in our pursuit of service excellence.

Where were we?

How services are delivered

It was clear the Department needed to make a fundamental change to the way it delivers services and benefits for the men and women who have served our country and rely on our services. Many Veterans feel they are missing out on services and benefits because they are unaware of what is available and simply don't know the right questions to ask.

As one Veteran so succinctly stated: "I do not know what I do not know."

To determine what changes were needed to reshape how services are delivered, a comprehensive review was required.

Taking a closer look

With a goal to make processes easier – both for Veterans to access VAC programs and services and for staff to deliver them – VAC launched the Service Delivery Review in fall 2015. It primarily examined the four ways that Veterans and their families access programs and services – online, by telephone, in-person and by mail – and the role of VAC staff in facilitating that access. The review and approach also had to align with broader Government of Canada policies and objectives, such as its goal to simplify access to all government services by personalizing services and integrating service delivery.

After more than a year of research into domestic and international best practices, internal and external consultations with Veterans, stakeholders, VAC staff, experts in service delivery, health research and innovation, workshops and focus groups, as well as a separate study into the journey a Veteran takes when seeking support from VAC, the Service Delivery Review is complete.

Change on the Horizon

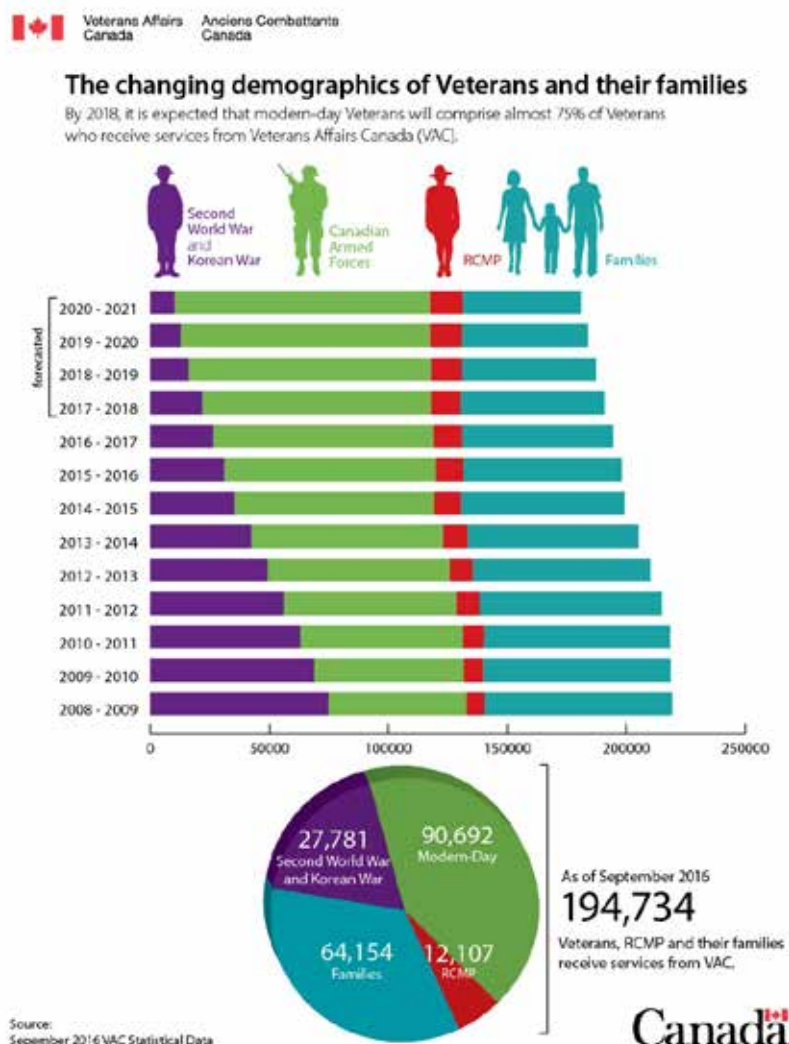
With some of the most insightful feedback coming from VAC staff and Veterans themselves, some early actions have already been taken and the implementation plan is mapped out – change is on the horizon. While change will not happen overnight, the new service delivery model will be more responsive to demographic, social and economic trends, and VAC staff will be better prepared to adapt to the evolving needs of an aging and increasingly diverse Veteran population.

The recommendations outlined below support a Veteran-centric “service excellence culture” aligned with the government’s commitment to improve services to all Canadians, ensuring a higher standard of service and care for Veterans and their families.

Where are we now?

A changing and diverse population

There are approximately 670,100 Veterans in Canada, and 95,000 serving CAF members. VAC provides services to nearly 200,000 Veterans, family members, RCMP members and others who require support. Ranging in age from 18 to 100, Veterans fall into two main categories: traditional Veterans who served in the Korean War or earlier, or modern-day Veterans, who served after the Korean War.



Strengths

VAC undeniably has a number of fundamental strengths, not the least of which is a deeply dedicated staff and successful partnerships with outside organizations to deliver services and pursue common goals. Many Veterans report: “It’s 100 percent better when staff talk to you about your situation.”

The Department also has a robust suite of social media channels with high user participation and engagement, which helps to provide information on programs and services widely at a relatively low cost. Additionally, use by clients of the My VAC Account electronic service has increased more than 1,000 percent over three years, to currently more than 41,000 users. The Department continues to improve My VAC Account’s functionality and ease of use, including the mobile app link that launched in 2015 and the Benefits Navigator in December 2016. Visit the My VAC Account website for a full list of services and sign up today: http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/e_services.

Challenges

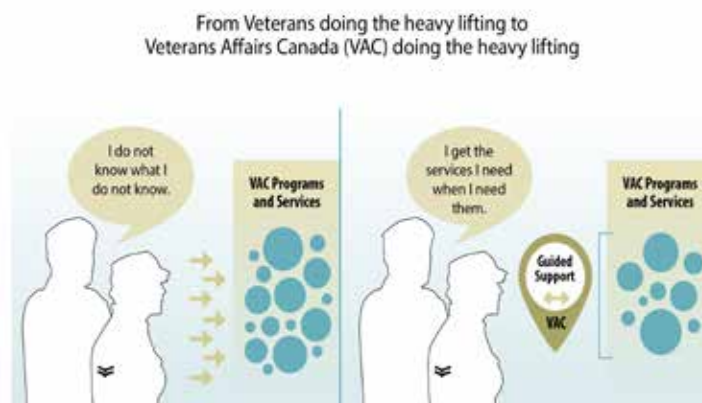
We launched the review to identify where problems did exist, and we were successful in our approach. The review revealed a number of issues, from internal challenges like training and staff retention, to external problems that Veterans and their families face, like complex messaging and processes that can lead to service gaps and programs not being understood or even overlooked.

The Service Delivery Review produced recommendations that will support and enhance the experience of all our Veterans and their family members. Several early actions have already been completed, and the Department has created a five-year phased approach to implementing a simplified service delivery model – with 90 percent of the recommendations to be implemented within the first three years.

While this type of transformation cannot happen instantly, with a goal to serve all Veterans with the care, compassion, and respect they deserve, the Department is committed to providing a greatly enhanced service delivery model that:

- places greater emphasis on the Veteran and their first contact with the Department
- ensures there is no wrong door when a Veteran reaches out
- tailors a personalized, in-depth response that addresses all of a Veteran’s needs, not just a select one or few
- focuses on a more holistic and comprehensive approach to Veteran well-being

At the end of the day, a Veteran’s well-being consists of having a new purpose, financial security, shelter, medical support, family and community support, and a sense of identity – our mission is to improve the overall well-being of Veterans and their families.



How will we get there?

Vision for the new service delivery model

The review has made clear that VAC needs to place greater emphasis on understanding all of the issues facing Veterans and their families when they first contact the Department and present Veterans and their families with options that are easy to understand and can be accessed in a simplified manner.

Feedback from VAC staff and Veterans described the current model to receive information as a “pull” model, where the onus is on Veterans to know what to ask for in order to pull the information they need from VAC staff on benefits and services. It was agreed that the system needs to change to a “push” model, where VAC openly and proactively provides Veterans with easy access to the information and advice they need through guided support. With this model, Veterans won’t miss out on support they’re entitled to simply because they do not know the right questions to ask.

As one Veteran said: “Without help, it’s hard to figure out how to get what you need.”

With this new model, Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members, Veterans, RCMP members and family members would experience timely, intuitive service that meets their specific needs, regardless of the method they have used to contact VAC (mail, fax, telephone, online or in person). There would be no wrong door when they approach VAC looking for service, and all of the benefits relevant to their situation would be presented to them upfront, removing the guesswork on the Veterans’ part for which single benefit they should apply.

Focusing on what matters to Veterans

The review resulted in several recommendations aimed at improving internal functions that will help the Department and front-line staff better serve Veterans and their family members – more efficient tools and training, strengthened partnerships and improved performance management practices.

Other recommendations focused on streamlining processes for VAC staff, for example, providing VAC staff access to entire client files to provide a more holistic service when appropriate and within privacy guide-

lines. Currently some employees have restricted access to files, causing them to request duplicate documentation and assessments, and waste time trying to find the appropriate staff member to access necessary files. VAC should also aim to further reduce the complexity of the Disability Program by ensuring Veterans are at the heart of all processes, communication is increased and the service delivery model is simplified and intuitive. Some recent measures VAC has already introduced to streamline the disability benefits process include:

- introducing a simplified decision-making process for some medical conditions;
- working with partners to speed up access to service health records; and,
- focusing on processing the oldest disability claims first.

An action plan (Table 1 in the Appendix) has been developed that outlines what needs to be done and when each recommendation will be completed (by fiscal year). Several actions have already been addressed and are outlined in Table 2 of the Appendix. It is important to note that approximately 90 percent of the action items will be completed within the next three years, and some that rely on other government departments or policy changes outside of VAC’s authority could take until fiscal year 2020-21 to complete.

Strengthening partnerships and third-party affiliations for enhanced service delivery

One recommendation that came out of this review was the need to work collaboratively with partners and third-party service providers. This has been an overarching theme since the Prime Minister presented Veterans Affairs Canada with its mandate in November 2015, appointing the Minister of Veterans Affairs as the Associate Minister of National Defence as well. This was to ensure close collaboration between the two departments as we work to smooth the transition between military and civilian life.

Work in this area is ongoing, but there is more that can be done now with DND/CAF and other partners and third parties as well, such as Service Canada, Medavie Blue Cross, Public Service and Procurement Canada, and others. A few early actions we’ve taken

in this regard include enhancing information sharing between DND/CAF and VAC as a foundation for future improvements. For example, a recent improvement enables VAC to receive personnel and service data from DND within seconds for CAF members and any Veteran released since 1997 – replacing what was a manual process.

We have also been working with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces on a Suicide Prevention Strategy that will help reduce the pressures that can lead to suicide while increasing the overall well-being of Veterans and their families. The strategy will be complete in Spring 2017.

Enhancing service delivery in-person

Most Veterans like visiting VAC offices and say “the VAC office is good because you talk to a real person. They are nice and seem to want to help you.” In-person services are invaluable to Veterans and their family members, especially as these are mostly used by case-managed Veterans with more complex issues.

VAC has already taken the complementary step of reopening offices across the country – seven of which have reopened to date and three more that are set to open by May 2017. We’ve also expanded outreach in the North, with VAC staff travelling once a month to the territories and other northern, remote communities to meet with Veterans and their families.

Guided Support Pilot Project

One of the early actions taken was the six-month Guided Support Pilot Project that launched in October 2016, designed to help develop and evaluate a new approach in providing personalized, one-on-one service to Veterans. This pilot project is designed to provide a single point of contact for Veterans, with the service and support they need, when and where they need it – without Veterans or their families having to guess what supports are available and how they can be accessed. So far the feedback is encouraging and the Veterans involved in the pilot are pleased with the experience.

With this new approach, a Veterans Service Agent (VSA) takes full responsibility of a Veteran and their family and becomes the primary point of contact. The VSA analyzes the Veteran’s needs, coordinating and integrating services and helping them navigate the system to ensure their needs are met. Generally the type of Veteran who requires this level of assistance is not case-managed, but needs some extra help. When required, an in person meeting is scheduled, held either in a VAC office or the Veteran’s home.

With feedback from this pilot project and two other pilots on Case Management and VAC’s toll-free phone service, the new guided support approach is expected to roll out across the country in 2017-2018.

Enhancing service delivery by telephone

Telephone is the most commonly used method to contact VAC – during the 2015-2016 fiscal year, over 500,000 calls were logged by VAC’s toll-free phone line, which provides a central point of contact for Veterans to obtain general information and request services. A few recommendations from the review call for improved phone experiences, including simplifying the caller ID process for clients calling us, i.e., enabling them to use a password instead of a series of questions to prove their ID. These changes are underway and should be implemented by 2018.

While one Veteran said “Someone called me to get more information to support my disability claim, I thought that was pretty cool,” another had the opposite experience and said “I kept calling and leaving voicemail messages, nobody could give me five minutes.” Consistency in service is essential to improving service delivery.

Clarifying External Caller ID

Another early action underway in response to these findings was changing the way phone calls from VAC to Veterans or their family members are displayed. Now, currently being rolled out across the country, calls will be clearly displayed as a call from Veteran Affairs Canada to ensure Veterans do not miss important phone calls.

Enhancing service delivery online

Many Canadians use the Internet to access programs and services, and Veterans are no different. They, too, want the convenience of around-the-clock on-line accessibility. There are several recommendations around improving VAC's online presence and My VAC Account's functionality, including achieving end-to-end electronic enablement of the Disability Program as well as parts of the rehabilitation and transition services, Veterans Independence Program and other long-term care benefits. These are all significant priorities that will take two to three years to complete.

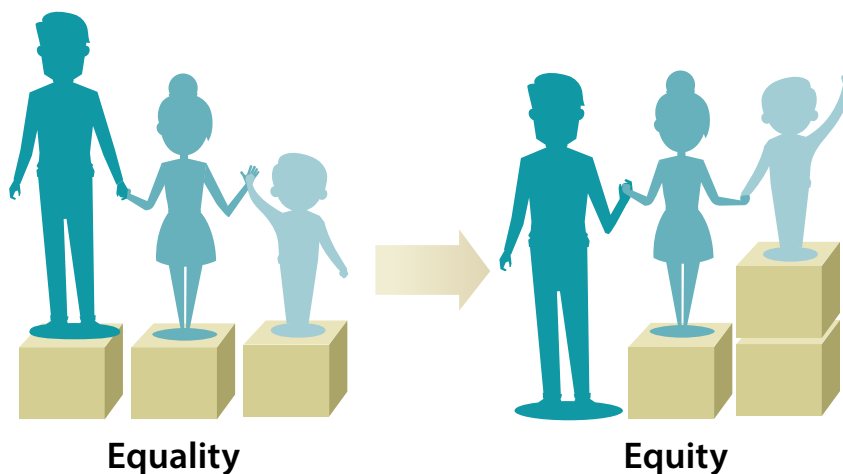
"I had no problem at all applying online through My VAC Account for a physical injury, but I just can't bring myself to apply online for a psychological condition. I start, then I just can't finish," says one Veteran of his online experience. Documenting your experiences and injuries can be emotionally challenging so being able to reach out quickly to someone who can support you through the process would help greatly. To address these type of situations, VAC is working to connect My VAC Account with VAC employees and external health professionals via on-line chat, to ease the process of sharing and documenting sensitive medical information to support a Veteran's application for benefits. This is a long-term goal for 2020.

Improving response times for online secure messages

We are reviewing the current process used to respond to My VAC Account secure messages. The goal after the review is complete is to put measures in place to speed up response times, taking into account the ever-increasing number of registered My VAC Account users.

Enhancing service delivery by mail

Veterans Affairs Canada receives over one million pieces of mail each year that need to be processed and has over 400 forms that are used by VAC staff, external health professionals, service providers and Veterans and their families. We know we need to do better and we will. To help us in that effort, we want to hear from you so we can continuously incorporate your feedback. That is why we are launching a voluntary survey for Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces members and their families – it will be your chance to have your say. We will reduce the number of forms you need to complete and we will also be creating a "VAC 101" brochure to clearly explain VAC services and benefits – this is also almost complete and should be ready for distribution this Spring.



Equality vs Equity

Equitable treatment based on individual needs.

Consistent, integrated, accessible and respectful services.

A renewed approach to service delivery.

Streamlining forms and letters

One of the early actions taken related to services delivered by mail and via other channels was continuing to implement the recommendations from the 2016 Forms and Letter Review. Many changes have now been made to improve Veteran-centric communications in our mailed forms and letters, and VAC is well on its way to reducing the number of the most commonly used forms and applications from 22 down to approximately 12.

One Veteran, one standard

At Veterans Affairs Canada we strive for service excellence based on the “One Veteran, one standard” approach, with a goal to ensure all Veterans are afforded the same positive and respectful service experience. Important changes happened in 2016-2017 and will continue throughout 2017-2018 with a focus on:

- Overhauling improvements to VAC’s Service Delivery Model to build a stronger foundation for enhancements to benefits and services
- Laying the ground work for the broader realignment of resources and service delivery change

Making a fundamental shift in the way the Department delivers services to Veterans and their families will require steady attention and progress over several years.

Make no mistake, changes are happening now, and work continues on short-, medium- and long-term actions. Each recommendation and planned response has different objectives with varying target dates, and we will be held accountable to meeting those timelines. There is work to be done, and we will track our progress and solicit feedback from Veterans as we go to ensure their needs are being met.

Different Veterans have different needs at different times. As such, our goal is to place greater emphasis on understanding all of the issues facing a Veteran and his or her family when they first contact VAC. This will take the Veteran’s focus off the process and place it on understanding the many factors that will eventually contribute to their well-being. It will permit VAC to tailor a response for an individualized, personalized approach to service delivery that addresses all of the Veteran’s needs, not just one or a few of them. Simply put, the focus will be placed on what matters most to Veterans and their families.

The Department’s holistic approach to improving Veteran well-being will result in a fundamental shift in how VAC delivers services, as well as providing renewed support to our front-line staff as they implement changes. We are confident Veterans and Canadians will see, hear and feel the shift to a more Veteran-centric approach, and be welcomed and served efficiently through “no wrong door.”

As the Minister has said: “We need transformative change to the current system to create an easy to access, simple to navigate, Veteran-centric process. It is time to rebuild, and this review gives us the feedback, tools and direction needed to accomplish this.”

Appendix

Table 1: Action plan with short-, medium- and long-term goals in fiscal years

Recommendation	Action	Short term		Med. term	Long term	
		2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Strengthening client feedback	Implement a regularly issued national client survey for Veterans, still serving Canadian Armed Forces Members and their families.	X				
	Establish an Office of Service Excellence to support continuous improvement.					X
Enhancing partnerships and contractual agreements	Establish and maintain service standards and processes with Medavie to monitor data and decision trends, their file referrals to area offices and Veteran-centric communications.		X			
	Streamline and clarify day-to-day working arrangements with partners and contractors, and re-establish outreach and relationships with provincial health authorities and health care providers to create more consistent and proactive approach.		X			
	Continue to work with Public Services and Procurement Canada to further improve information management and document routing to reduce processing times (i.e. Matane).			X		
	Work with Service Canada on communications to inform the public on services provided at Service Canada on behalf of VAC; review VAC-related content on Service Canada's website and in printed materials for accuracy.	X				
Access to documents and systems	Improve employee access to Veterans' service files to facilitate a holistic service approach.		X			
Reduce complexity of the Disability Program	Apply new decision models to accelerate and simplify the adjudication of certain disability claims, including PTSD, hearing loss and some musculoskeletal conditions, to reduce the evidence burden on Veterans and expedite decisions.	X				
Enhancing in-person service delivery	Reopen previously closed offices by May 2017 and expand service to Veterans in the North.		X			

Recommendation	Action	Short term		Med. term	Long term	
		2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Enhancing service delivery by mail	Review protocols and procedures for routing, scanning and distributing information to ensure efficiency and effectiveness, including streamlining the distribution of outgoing mail and reducing the number of mailing addresses; promote online usage to reduce – or eliminate – the use of faxes within the next five years.					X
	Fully implement the 2016 Forms and Letter Review recommendations to improve Veteran-centric communications.	X				
	Continue to review application forms sent to Veterans to ensure clarity, relevance and a reduction in number of forms where possible.			X		
	Create a “VAC 101” brochure to clearly explain services and benefits (for print and digital use).	X				
Enhancing service delivery by phone	Simplify the caller identification process for clients calling the National Contact Centre Network by using a client password instead of ID proving questions.		X			
	Ensure outgoing calls indicate (i.e. caller ID) that VAC is calling.	X				
Enhancing online service delivery and digital strategy	Achieve end-to-end electronic (e-)enablement of the Disability Program.		X			
	Develop VAC’s digital strategy to establish the principals for creating end-to-end business processes and enabling technologies.	X				
	Develop a single sign-on for clients for all VAC programs – VAC-based, Vocational Services and Federal Health Claims Processing System.					X
	Develop a cross-channel integration strategy that ensures the same level of service across all channels (i.e. “no wrong door”).					X
	Achieve end-to-end e-enablement for the remaining VAC Programs (e.g., Veterans Independence Program and long term care benefits from My VAC Account).			X		
	Implement Government of Canada “Single Window” strategy and My VAC Account integration with external health professionals as appropriate (e.g., OSI clinics, Benefits Health Services Online, provincial eHealth).					X

Recommendation	Action	Short term		Med. term	Long term	
		2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Introducing Guided Support	Implement Enhancement of Veterans Service Agents (VSA) Guided Support pilot project.	X				
	Implement Case Management Disengagement and National Contact Center Network (NCCN) Reach Out pilot projects. Case-managed Veterans will be assigned to a VSA short-term for guided support toward complete disengagement, and the NCCN will reach out to expedite the engagement process.		X			
	Proceed with implementing the Guided Support approach nationally following the three pilot projects and further define the potential number of Veterans who would benefit.		X			
Enhancing outreach to Veterans	Target outreach and information on a regular basis to CAF personnel at all stages of their careers.			X		
	Include outreach to Veterans, clients, communities and stakeholders as a core function of area offices.		X			
	Increase promotion of outreach events to target audiences; continue to explore partnership arrangements with ex-service associations and non-government organizations (NGOs) to promote VAC services and benefits and further explore opportunities to engage new external partners in service delivery.	X				
Implementing the new Service Delivery Model	Create a Service Delivery Review Implementation Team to manage the roll out over a period of five years.	X				

Appendix

Table 2: Completed action items

Recommendation	Action	Benefits for Veterans
Strengthening client feedback	Implement a regularly issued national client survey for Veterans, still serving Canadian Armed Forces Members and their families.	The survey is ready and responses will start being collected this spring, giving Veterans and their family members a way to provide feedback.
Enhancing partnerships and contractual agreements	Streamline and clarify day-to-day working arrangements with partners to create a more consistent and proactive approach.	The Interoperability Project between VAC and DND/CAF was completed, enhancing information sharing as a foundation for future improvements.
Reduce complexity of the Disability Program	Apply new decision models to accelerate and simplify the adjudication of certain disability claims, including PTSD, hearing loss and some musculoskeletal conditions, to reduce the evidence burden on Veterans and expedite decisions.	New decision models and the modified Veterans Independence Program application form (only first application needs a signature) has simplified the process, resulting in better and faster services to Veterans.
Enhancing in-person service delivery	Reopen previously closed offices by May 2017 and expand service to Veterans in the North.	Seven client service offices have re-opened: Corner Brook, Nfld.; Brandon, Man.; Kelowna, B.C.; Sydney, N.S.; Saskatoon, Sask.; Charlottetown, P.E.I.; and Thunder Bay, Ont.; and VAC staff has been visiting northern communities monthly since Aug. 2016, providing Veterans better access to case managers and front-line staff.
Enhancing service delivery by mail	Fully implement the 2016 Forms and Letter Review recommendations to improve Veteran-centric communications.	Of the most commonly used forms and applications, VAC is down to approximately 12 from 22, reducing the amount of paperwork required.
	Create a “VAC 101” brochure to clearly explain services and benefits (for print and digital use).	The completed brochure provides a clear outline of all of VAC’s benefits and services, ensuring all Veterans, family members, and still serving members of CAF and the RCMP are aware of what is available.
Enhancing service delivery by phone	Ensure outgoing calls indicate (i.e. caller ID) that VAC is calling.	Currently being rolled out across the country, Veterans now know when VAC is calling.
Introducing Guided Support	Implement Enhancement of Veterans Service Agents (VSA) Guided Support pilot project.	The pilot project is almost complete, with an abundance of feedback already collected in preparation for a nationwide roll-out that will provide personalized, one-on-one service to Veterans.
Implementing the new Service Delivery Model	Create a Service Delivery Review Implementation Team to manage the roll out over a period of five years.	The new team has been established and is working hard on the continued implementation of these recommendations to ensure service delivery excellence across the country.