



National Association
of Federal Retirees

Association nationale
des retraités fédéraux

LISTENING TO **VETERANS**



2018 | **Outreach Report**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


The National Association of Federal Retirees (Federal Retirees) developed a veterans outreach initiative in 2017 to listen to veterans and better understand what is and isn't working for them as they transition out of service and beyond. On behalf of our members, of whom about 60,000 are veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), we wanted to understand how to best serve the needs of veterans and their families in an evolving policy environment with many other government and non-government organizations (NGOs) also working on their behalf.


As a neutral organization, Federal Retirees is in a unique position to elicit responses from a broad range of veterans regardless of their existing relationships with other agencies. Our goal in gathering this information was simple: to share it and support an environment of collaboration and communication among veteran-focused agencies, so that we can all better advocate for and serve the veterans community.

This report is a high-level summary of the responses we received. The supporting document, *Veterans Speak*, is a compilation of all the input veterans and their families shared with us, grouped by theme. The themes are the basis for the Federal Retirees Veterans Summit on April 9, 2018, where veterans and other agencies will collaborate to build on aspects that are working and support each other to innovate and improve areas where veterans experience difficulties.

The themes veterans spoke to were clear:

 Canadian Armed Forces: pensions and benefits, medical transfer of care and records, transition support and release information

 Royal Canadian Mounted Police: inconsistent release experiences, information gaps, medical documentation issues

 Veterans Affairs Canada: difficult application and appeals processes, communication needs and issues, information difficulties, assessment and reassessment challenges, distrust and respect concerns

 Family: unmet support and information needs, especially for mental health

Federal Retirees looks forward to working with the government departments and other NGOs that serve veterans at its summit on April 9. Together, we can make a positive difference for the veterans we all serve.



BACKGROUND

The National Association of Federal Retirees is an independent, non-government-funded organization. As a membership-based non-profit, we represent approximately 180,000 members, of whom about 60,000 are current or former CAF and RCMP members, and their spouses. Our members have consistently said ensuring veterans are supported is a key aim of Federal Retirees and have given us clear mandates to undertake initiatives to achieve that.

For purposes of this conversation and report, Federal Retirees considers veterans to be all individuals who have served in the CAF or the RCMP and who have been honourably discharged.

There are many players in the veteran support field. Government agencies include National Defence (for CAF), Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness (for RCMP) and Veterans Affairs Canada, with linkages to other departments. Dozens of NGOs advocate for and support veterans, with the Royal Canadian Legion (Legion) and Federal Retirees being the two largest. As government agencies update their policies and programs, and NGOs form and evolve, there was a need to find out what veterans continue to need for support.

To determine the best way for Federal Retirees to support veterans, we asked veterans themselves about their needs. The intent was to determine key areas where veterans and their families are getting the support they need or are experiencing gaps, and then to work with various other government departments and NGOs to find the best way to meet the evolving — and in some cases still outstanding — needs of veterans.

APPROACH

Background

As a non-profit that supports the veterans' community, Federal Retirees approached this initiative as a neutral party when asking veterans for their views. While National Defence, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman regularly reach out to serving CAF members and veterans, there is value in third-party initiated conversations with veterans and their families. Organizations like Federal Retirees provide safe environments where veterans and families can share candid feedback, without the shadow of fear that many have of real or perceived reprisals if still in uniform or if relying on veterans' benefits. Neutral organizations are also relevant and useful in connecting with populations that may have become disengaged. The feedback noted here and included in the accompanying document *Veterans Speak* may reveal new information and insights or may serve to validate data already available.

Process

Twelve town halls were conducted coast-to-coast. To maximize attendance, the events were held at neutral locations near larger military bases with a mix of service types per base so that all components of the CAF were represented: land, sea and air. RCMP detachments are much smaller and more scattered; however, focused communication was used to reach serving and veteran RCMP members who lived close to the town hall events.

A multi-faceted communications approach was used to engage serving and veteran RCMP and CAF members. Emphasis was placed on print advertising in veteran-focused magazines and publications from the Legion and RCMP veterans, as well as military base and community newspapers; posters in community locations and advertising in Federal Retirees' *Sage* magazine. Federal Retirees' website and social media channels were also used, and Federal Retirees' 60,000 veterans were reached by email and/or telephone.

To support attendance and participation, the town halls were held in accessible locations. Automatic transcription, similar to closed captioning on television, was provided to help hearing impaired individuals. Floor microphones were placed for participants' easy access and volunteers were available to bring microphones to individuals who could not comfortably reach the floor microphones.

Finally, Federal Retirees conducted early awareness outreach and progress updates on the overall veterans outreach initiative with stakeholder groups, including government departments, the ombudsmen's offices and NGOs such as the Legion.

The Questions

Our advertising was designed to attract a range of veterans from CAF and RCMP. We wanted to hear from people who were recently released and people who had been released five or more years ago.

Our focus was primarily on those who had been medically released to ensure that they were receiving the assistance they needed, but we also welcomed input from individuals who had voluntarily released, some of whom encountered challenges later. These factors influenced the focus of the questions that were asked at the town hall events and in the online feedback tool.

Since support for veterans is a continuum of services that are accessed over a lifetime, from when an individual is still in uniform to after they release from service, a series of questions (see appendices A & B) was developed to explore how veteran needs were being met at various stages. It is well-recognized that family is integral to the veteran experience: questions specific to their experiences were included, to determine how family needs were being met as veterans transition to life out of uniform.

When addressing service gaps, it is important to understand the aspects that already work and should be preserved or expanded. Veterans were asked to identify from their perspective what works and what doesn't.

In following CAF and VAC announcements, and working more closely with each agency, we identified that some programs and policies continue to evolve to better meet veterans needs. Because transition and support processes have changed over time, we asked respondents to identify approximately when they released. The intent was to determine if new programs have met previously unmet needs and to verify where gaps still exist.

An online version of the town hall questions was developed to enable veterans and their families to share their experiences and thoughts in writing. Federal Retirees promoted this feedback mechanism on cards that were distributed to participants, and via emails and webpages. The tool enabled attendees who may not have been comfortable speaking in a group setting or those who had additional comments to share their thoughts, and allowed people who were not able to attend to share their perspectives.

Confidentiality was a key component in enabling participants to respond freely. We did not ask for identifying information and any personal or confidential information that was inadvertently provided has been removed from the report.

Attendees tended to cover multiple question areas when they responded to individual questions. To aid analysis, responses were grouped by theme in the compilation document *Veterans Speak*. Responses were also colour-coded to visually separate items that veterans identified as working well from areas where gaps or problems exist.

Homeless and At-Risk Veterans

It should be noted that Federal Retirees does not have the expertise or reach to connect with the most severely affected veterans — those who are homeless. This segment of the veteran population requires focused outreach and consultation to determine how to meet their extra needs beyond those identified by other veterans in this report.

Veterans who have committed suicide also represent an area where needs were unmet, but we did not have the expertise or reach to connect with the family survivors of these veterans to gain insight. We know that veterans are at an elevated risk for suicide across genders but particularly younger men; but focused study and more data is required to determine risk factors, how to mitigate them and how to evolve service delivery to them, as veterans transition out of service and beyond. This is another segment of the extended veteran population that requires separate consultation.

WHAT VETERANS TOLD US

Transitioning out of Uniform

Canadian Armed Forces

Pension and Benefits Processing

The time to receive first pension cheques is improving, but inconsistent. Favourable responses tended to come from more recent releases, although as late as 2016 pension delays were still causing frustration. Interruption of health benefits was a common complaint and appeared to be due to either slow release/pension processing or information glitches to continue benefits after release.

No one prepared me that it would take over six months to get my first pension cheque.

2016

While Regular Force members of the CAF were more likely to give better responses on the release process, full-time Reservists felt disconnected from the process and that support and information were lacking.

Medical Care

It has been very difficult. I don't have a family doctor so my treatment plan for long-term issues has been totally disrupted. It's good that my wife could guide me on how to navigate the civilian system.

2016

In terms of medical care outside the military, veterans often struggle to find a civilian doctor, which means an interruption in the continuity of care. It is further complicated for veterans, as most civilian doctors' understanding of veterans' health issues may be limited. Participants encountered doctors who were not willing or able to complete paperwork to support veteran claims for assistance from SISIP or VAC programs.

Military medical records were also cited as a problem. This included incomplete records or lack of regular medical assessments, particularly for Reservists as well as lack of access to the records.

Full-time Reservists usually continue to see health care providers within provincial health plan networks while serving. As a result, their military medical records, which VAC relies on to validate eligibility for programs and services, may be incomplete. Full-time Reservists expressed different issues with the medical system and information, and cited general difficulties navigating release and accessing VAC services.

Support and Information

Transition programs for a period before release were identified as very helpful. Veterans who released from CAF recently were more likely to have positive comments about the process than individuals who released more than 10 years ago. Many veterans identified a disconnect with the civilian community and the need to have integration support of some kind for an extended period before release. The sense of “disconnect” with the civilian community, ranging from social to business matters, is very real for some veterans and families.

I greatly appreciated being able to participate in the transition program towards release during the last six months of my military service. It allowed me to work with civilian colleagues and live quietly without uniforms while contributing to society.

2011

Programs that provided information over a period during the transition period and for spouses also made the transition process go more smoothly. At the same time, many respondents found information either overwhelming or absent. For individuals who medically released rather than voluntarily released, the volume of information was difficult to process.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police

I would have dealt with the same young lady and she was very knowledgeable on the procedures that were in place because that's what she had done for a long, long time.

2014 voluntary release

Release Process and Information

The release experience was perceived as inconsistent for the RCMP respondents. Several veterans spoke highly of an RCMP staff person in Winnipeg (now transferred out) who helped with their release process. Other releases indicated that they had received little or no information at all.

Medical Care

Individuals releasing did not consistently receive an exit medical or did not get a copy of their medical records. There were also some concerns about the accuracy of medical records that were provided. This complicated later applications for support and services through VAC.

Veterans Affairs Canada Information and Communication

Format, Consistency and Timing

When you write up the paper that you send, it has got to be written the way Veterans Affairs want. It doesn't matter how you want it, if it doesn't meet their standard, you get nothing.

Release date not indicated

Concerns with communications from VAC were common threads in the feedback received. A common issue for veterans was finding out about programs from fellow veterans rather than from VAC. Both CAF and RCMP veterans indicated a lack of information about VAC when they released medically, with no differences noted between people who released recently or longer ago. Consequently, some veterans have not been able to access programs in a timely fashion.

There was uncertainty about VAC's goals in asking for certain pieces of information on forms that veterans are required to complete, which describe the impact of their injury to daily living, etc.

Several veterans indicated that "the right words" had to be used to avoid rejection of a claim but people don't know what those "right words" are.

Veterans frequently noted difficulties with the format in which they received information. While some found the "My VAC Account" electronic system helpful, many were not comfortable trying to access their information, or information relating to their personal case with VAC, online. Others found the information available to them online out-of-date and/or inaccurate.

Veterans tended to prefer having a case manager, although this varied with the knowledge and experience of the case manager. Veterans who did not have or who no longer had a case manager were worried about missing necessary information and advocacy.

Respondents generally found VAC staff were polite in communications and interactions but reported frustration at getting different answers from different staff members, and at getting a different person on the phone each time.

There was a lot of concern at what appears to be staff turnover at VAC and the sense that VAC staff do not truly understand where CAF and RCMP members come from with their needs for support. A common response was that the civilian workers at VAC just could not relate to what the veteran had experienced or was dealing with and consequently could not understand the service and supports the veteran required.

I believe the VAC has excellent programs to support vets. VAC staff (at least at the working level) lack experience, or lack training, or are unqualified to effectively or efficiently initiate those programs.

Release date not indicated

The preferred communication method with VAC varied, with more recent veterans preferring electronic options — although those who had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often found this more stressful. For complex or personal issues, participants preferred in-person communication. Even respondents who indicated that electronic communication was preferred for routine needs, tended to also want access to a person either by phone or in-person as an anchor for their case management.



Veterans Affairs Canada Processes

Application and Service

Application and documentation processes were consistently identified as problematic for veterans. This was an even bigger problem for individuals who released with mental health issues or with multiple injuries. Several responses indicated files had been lost. Full-time Reservists expressed considerable difficulty with accessing VAC programs.

Different eligibility criteria for different VAC programs and renaming programs creates confusion and frustration about what to apply for.

There were several comments about the lack of standardization for service levels delivered by VAC. Some participants who had been denied access to certain programs indicated they knew of veterans in similar situations who were deemed eligible for those programs.

I was in the process of making an appeal but could not go forward with it. I was overwhelmed with more paperwork. I don't understand why an appeal is required when you submit info taken directly from your med file.

Release date not indicated

Access to ongoing medical treatment and documentation was a problem for many veterans as this complicated the application process for VAC support programs. Veterans expressed frustration and helplessness at how to address this.

Slow, arbitrary, ridiculous. Any time I contact them my blood pressure goes through the roof. This is what happens when they delay, deny and hope we die.

Release date not indicated

Several concerns were raised about the VAC's use of outside agencies for some services. The lack of standardization for things such as mileage claims, and the lack of quality were noted. Quality of service concerns related both to how VAC itself delivered support and how the outside agencies that VAC contracts with delivered support.

Appeals Processes

Veterans expressed a lot of distrust in appeals processes. The expectation was that it would take a long time, and that the first couple of decisions would be "no" and "no". A common response was that decisions were being made by people who lack the background to understand the veterans' problems.

Comments about actual coverage indicate that veterans feel that this is a rather arbitrary process about what is and is not covered, even if the answer is "yes" for some support.

Length of Time

Processing time was identified as a common challenge, either for getting answers to questions or to get decisions on applications and appeals.

Target response times by VAC seem to create more irritation than less, due to consistently missed deadlines.

Revisiting Coverage

There were concerns by veterans who have experienced deteriorating medical conditions with no increase to coverage or benefits. On a similar note, the necessity to continually fill out forms on the status of medical conditions that are permanent was an irritant, particularly when it did not change the level of benefits.

The assessment process for multiple injuries was noted as frustrating and complicated for veterans, especially if one or more of the injuries worsens and requires reassessment. The sum effect of two or more disabilities can be more than the impact of each individual disability. Two moderate injuries can render an individual totally disabled; veterans felt that the sum effect was not properly considered.

When one requests a reassessment, VAC considers one case at a time, VAC does not add all pensions together...

Release date not indicated

Several veterans had originally released before the New Veterans Charter and had since been brought back in by VAC for reassessment. Veterans perceived this as the start of what would be a negative process by which they lost coverage, and in some instances the re-evaluations caused a considerable amount of mental and emotional distress. The perception was that this had to be done to keep from losing benefits rather than that VAC was trying to help.

Other

Respect

There were two areas where veterans noted a feeling of lack of respect when dealing with VAC: feeling they have to fight for benefits, and some interactions with VAC staff. Many felt that processes were intentionally difficult to discourage applications or to deny benefits. While interactions with VAC staff were generally positive when they occurred, there were several instances where veterans identified that staff had treated them poorly.

Waits often as long as 18 months or even two years. Ridiculous. Delay, deny and die.

Release date not indicated

Family Support

Information

Transition

Improved information and access to mental health support for families were frequently identified as essentials.

For both CAF and RCMP, many families noted they did not receive information about the release process and/or family supports available to them. Some spouses were able to attend the Second Career Assistance Network (SCAN) but did not find the information relevant to their circumstances.

Families Serve, Too...

It is clear from what we heard that families are significantly impacted by service personnel transitioning out of uniform in ways civilians never experience. If the family lives on base, transition out of service means finding a new home and new career — sometimes for both spouses. Parents may need to find new schools for children. The veteran will need a new family doctor, a dentist. The family overall adjusts to life that is, in many ways, disconnected from the military family community they have grown with. Voluntary releases have choice and agency in transitioning out of service, as well as time to plan for it with their families and to adapt. Individuals who release for medical reasons are less likely to have choices, and more likely to have additional challenges, that make the process more complex and difficult for all concerned.

Veterans Affairs

Improved information and access to mental health support for families was frequently identified as a need.

Family members — spouses and adult children — also noted inconsistencies in information received about programs for the veteran and families.

...And Their Needs are Unique

Family members identified two distinct ways in which they need to interact with Veterans Affairs: as caregivers for a veteran and as clients requiring resources and care of their own. Each path to assistance requires a unique, focused approach and service philosophy.

Service and Support

VAC family support coverage was noted as being inconsistent. At the same time, we heard several favourable responses for supports that are in place, but still a high degree of dissatisfaction for many respondents. Many of the family members who expressed difficulties have had to either cut back on working to support their veteran or provide significant financial support for outside assistance.

Participants also noted that the Veterans Independence Program (VIP) is not available to RCMP, even though they are facing similar care needs.

It is long, overwhelming, confusing, frustrating, not user friendly, considering that many of us have full-time jobs, businesses, kids to care for and injured vets, and that dealing with Veterans (Affairs) Canada is almost a full-time job on its own.

Summary of Findings

The comments shared by veterans at the outreach town hall sessions and online form the accompanying compilation document, *Veterans Speak*. The comments are grouped by theme to establish the areas of greatest impact for the veterans based on the number of responses. Responses are also colour-coded to indicate positive feedback versus areas of concern. This is to help identify areas where processes are working well and need to be preserved or built upon. The points highlighted in this section summarize the feedback provided by veterans.

While the focus of the outreach exercise was to listen to veterans about how to continue to improve support to them going forward, and bring veteran-focused organizations together with that goal in mind, our organizations have another consideration beyond the findings reported here: how to address the outstanding concerns of veterans who have already released and the challenges they have been through in accessing services and support. A strategy that encompasses respectful recognition of their concerns, and efforts to reconcile and create positive relationships with them going forward, is required. Addressing these issues is essential to the wellbeing of these veterans and to the organizations that support them. Unless these historic concerns are addressed, veterans who experienced these difficulties will likely continue to express dissatisfaction about past problems in future surveys.

Canadian Armed Forces

- Pension and benefits processing is improving, but there are persistent concerns with delays in first pension payment, disruption of health coverage and sense of disconnect from Reservists
- Medical transfer of care; records incomplete or missing
- Increased transition support has been helpful
- Information for medical release can be overwhelming

Royal Canadian Mounted Police

- Inconsistent release experiences, information gaps, medical documentation issues
- Generally, more negative experience reported if medically released
- Lack of medical documentation causes issues with VAC applications

Veterans Affairs Canada

- Application and appeals remain generally difficult for veterans in terms of processes and length of time they take
- A range of communication modes is appreciated for information
- Capable and responsive case managers made veterans' experiences with VAC better
- Electronic access points such as My VAC Account is appropriate for some individuals and for accessing some types of information, but must be balanced with in-person and telephonic support
- Late, absent or conflicting information has led to significant frustration
- Veterans feel civilian staff at VAC do not understand veteran issues
- Assessment for multiple medical issues and reassessment for new programs and reworked existing ones has caused confusion and dissatisfaction
- Many veterans have a feeling of being disrespected due to the difficulty with the process and with treatment by some VAC staff, and have a low level of trust in VAC as a result

Family

- Families expressed a general lack of support and information for transition and after release. This is improving for some CAF sites (Trenton). Some spouses had access to the SCAN seminars for CAF but didn't find the information relevant for a medical release.
- Challenges in accessing mental health services; while programs are in place, families report difficulties and barriers in accessing programs despite numerous requests, especially after release

CONCLUSIONS

The National Association of Federal Retirees approached its veterans outreach initiative from a neutral perspective with the aim to build on what works and improve on what doesn't for veterans as they transition out of uniformed service and through ongoing care. More than over 500 veterans from coast-to-coast provided candid responses about their experiences, both good and bad. Many offered constructive suggestions for improvement even as they explained areas where they faced problems.

The feedback gained in this initiative is expected to both validate existing data and provide new insights for government and non-government organizations in the veterans' landscape. While aspects of processes, services and supports to CAF and RCMP veterans are working, concrete changes are clearly needed in some areas.

The National Association of Federal Retirees believes this report will support ongoing conversations and start new discussions to ensure the resources that veterans and their families need and deserve are in place.

Together, our next step is to honour what veterans told us.

APPENDIX A

Town Hall Questions

Transition Questions

When you respond to any of these questions, please indicate approximately when you released from service:

- 1 How did/are you finding the release process; what works, what doesn't?
- 2 How do you want to be served: in person, more electronic information, peer support, other?
- 3 What are you expecting from the proposed new transition groups the government has announced?
- 4 What do you see as family supports that are needed?
- 5 How do you find the information you've received in terms of, timing, volume, clarity?
- 6 If you are a family support person, how do you find the information you've received?
- 7 What was your experience to access service and information for yourself or your family member?

Veterans Affairs Questions

- 8 How did you find the application process; what works, what doesn't?
- 9 How do you want to be served: in person, more electronic information, peer support, other?
- 10 What do you see as family supports that are needed?
- 11 How do you find the information you've received in terms of, timing, volume, clarity?
- 12 If you are a family support person, how do you find the information you've received?
- 13 What was your experience to access service and information for yourself or your family member?
- 14 Did you receive the services you needed through Veterans Affairs or did you need to go to an external agency?
- 15 How did you find the transition from government (military) medical care to civilian medical care?

- 16 For people with longer term chronic issues, how do you find ongoing Veterans Affairs support and service?
- 17 If you or your family require more extensive daily support, how have you found Veterans Affairs support for home or other living arrangements?
- 18 How would you describe the vocational support you have received from Veterans Affairs in terms of meeting your needs, accessibility, ease of access?

APPENDIX B

Web Questions

Your Service Transition

- 1 How did/are you finding the release process; what works, what doesn't?
- 2 What are you expecting from the proposed new transition groups the government has announced?
- 3 How do you find the information you've received in terms of: timing, volume, clarity?
- 4 What was your experience to access service and information for yourself or your family member?
- 5 How did you find the transition from government (military) medical care to civilian medical care?

Family Perspectives

- 1 If you are a family support person, how do you find the information you've received for transition?
- 2 What was your experience to access Veterans Affairs service and information for your family member?
- 3 If your veteran requires more extensive daily support, how have you found Veterans Affairs support for home or other living arrangements?
- 4 What do you see as family supports that are needed for transition and post service?

Veterans Affairs Processes

- 1 How did you find the application process; what works, what doesn't?
- 2 How do you want to be served: in person, more electronic information, peer support, other?
- 3 How do you find the information you've received in terms of: timing, volume, clarity?
- 4 For people with longer term chronic issues, how do you find ongoing Veterans Affairs support and service?

Veterans Affairs Programs

- 1 What was your experience to access service and information?
- 2 Did you receive the services you needed through Veterans Affairs or did you need to go to an external agency?
- 3 If you require more extensive daily support, how have you found Veterans Affairs support for home or other living arrangements?
- 4 How would you describe the vocational support you have received from Veterans Affairs in terms of meeting your needs, accessibility, ease of access.





National Association
of Federal Retirees

Association nationale
des retraités fédéraux

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