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Canada's Veterans Affairs Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Veterans' transition to civilian life hampered by access to supports, say advocacy groups

The majority of people who leave military service transition to civilian life relatively well but around 1,600 veterans annually struggle, according to the Veterans Transition Network's CEO.

BY JESSE CNOCKAERT

Veterans Affairs Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor announced an investment of up to $11.4-million for veteran-serving groups across Canada on Nov. 4. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Supports are available to help thousands of Canadian veterans who struggle with adapting to life after service, but administrative barriers and long wait times remain significant obstacles for many, according to the Veterans Transition Network's chief executive officer.

"I think there are a lot of supports available—which is good to see—and it's good to see that there has been … more services dedicated to this broader issue of transition and the underlying mental health challenges. But, in my mind, the major issue … is still the issue of accessibility," said Oliver Thorne. "Veterans often struggle to get access to these services. They're there. They're available, but … the process that they need to navigate, often through Veterans Affairs, limits their ability to engage with those services."

Thorne estimated that about 5,000 people leave military service every year. While the majority of these veterans transition to post-service life with relative success, about 1,500 to 1,600 people annually have difficulties, according to Thorne. Veterans dealing with a physical or mental health injuries as a result of their service are all more likely to struggle in the change, he added.

One of the biggest hurdles facing many veterans as they transition is overcoming complicated application processes, or administrative delays for accessing support services from the federal government, Thorne said. The federal government has taken steps to address these issues, but there's more work to be done, he said.

"I think it's necessary for them to reduce that administrative process that stands between a veteran coming on day one, and actually sitting down in some kind of counselling—in some type of specialized service that they need. Less paperwork, less waiting time, and just a greater and more responsive provision of services to veterans who are asking for help," he said.

In 2022, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) faced a backlog of about 23,000 veterans waiting for disability claims to be processed, as reported in Global News.

Since then, the Office of the Veterans Ombud (OVO) found that VAC has made "tremendous progress" in reducing the backlog of disability claim applications, with disability benefit first applications going from being completed at a 61 per cent rate in the first quarter to 73 per cent in the third quarter, according to an annual report released on Aug. 21.

However, wait times for disability benefit decisions continue to be the top complaint received by the OVO, reads the report.

Part of why so many veterans have difficulty adapting to civilian life is because they suddenly find themselves without the structured way of life and the social support network they've become accustomed to after years of military service, according to Thorne. As an example, he said he recently spoke with a veteran who, after a long career in the Canadian Armed Forces, had to make his first doctor's appointment at the age of 58. While he was serving, doctor's appointments were scheduled for him, Thorne explained.

"The service in the military is so much more than a job. It is, for many people, a cornerstone of their identity. It's where they've derived a significant part of their value system. It is their social support network," he said. "When they leave behind service, they leave behind … those components of their life as well, and that can be really tough to rebuild."

When asked about how well Veterans Affairs Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, N.B.) is handling her file, Thone said it would be tough to say because the minister does not represent the entirety of the Veterans Affairs system.

"I found her to be pleasant to deal with. I believe that she genuinely cares about veterans, but of course, it all comes down to what are the changes that occur, and I think that's there's still work to do in that area," he said.

Carolyn Hughes, director of veterans services for the Royal Canadian Legion, told *The Hill Times* that veterans also often face financial struggles during their transition. Finding medical help and a place to live can also be a challenge, she added.

"There's so much unknown. Like, if you have a soldier, sailor, or airman or airwoman that's been serving for 30 years [and] has a mental health condition … that's going to be a tremendous experience to transition because now you're responsible for finding a family doctor, which we know there's a shortage of in Canada," she said.

Scott Maxwell, chief executive officer of Wounded Warriors Canada, told *The Hill Times* that gaps in supports can form as veterans transition from reliance on the Department of National Defence (DND) during service to VAC post-service.

"They have to almost start the entire process over again with an entirely separate ministry … and align benefits and chase after their disability awards, await adjudication for claims, [and] get into a whole new benefit structure. They lose their access to their primary care physician and primary care teams," he said. "It's anything but seamless, and I think what we see … is that is a significant gap that needs to be addressed."

Maxwell said the federal government must do more to bridge the gap between the DND and VAC, so that veteran benefits are "all lined up" before release.

"When these things aren't set up at the get-go, with respect to disability benefits, awards, and access to care, you've basically left the veteran—in many cases—to try to navigate it on their own. And when you're struggling, and when you're ill and injured … that's the last thing they should have to be worried about," he said. "We know what they're going to have to deal with … [so] set up all the mechanisms you possibly can to actually ease that process on their way out."

Sean Bruyea, a former Royal Canadian Air Force intelligence officer and government accountability advocate, told *The Hill Times* that he considers Canada to currently be in a "resource-poor environment for the public service," without enough staff or resources at VAC.

As an example, he cited Ottawa's decision to sign a contract with a private firm for the provision of mental and physical health services for veterans.

In June 2021, the federal government announced a multi-million dollar contract with Partners in Canadian Veterans Rehabilitation Services (PCVRS) to provide rehabilitation services and support for veterans and their families as they transition to life after military service.

"I sacrifice out of obligation to serve my country, and Canada says, 'Yeah, maybe this charity will take care of you,'" said Bruyea. "This is not a reciprocity of services. I'm obligated to die for Canada if I'm ordered to … but Canada has no obligation whatsoever to do anything for me, and can hand me off onto for-profit corporations and charities?"

The contract with PCVRS has been criticized by Chris Aylward, national president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), who called the contract "a mistake from the beginning," and said veterans and their families should be served by public service workers and not by private corporations, in a PSAC press release on March 2, 2023.

Then-veterans affairs minister Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, P.E.I.) defended the $570-million contract, arguing it would ultimately deliver better services to former service members, as reported in Global News on Feb. 12, 2023.

When asked about Petitpas Taylor, Bruyea said he considers her an improvement over previous ministers. He argued she has a better understanding than most of what it takes to care for veterans, but budget constraints limit the minister's effectiveness.

"There's a government-wide exercise right now to prepare for future cutbacks, to present planning for how they're going to save money, right down to the section level of all departments," said Bruyea. "Under that environment, there's no way this minister has been given enough lee-way to actually make any meaningful change."

To help support veterans, Petitpas Taylor announced an investment of up to $11.4-million for veteran-serving organizations across Canada on Nov. 4. This includes $500,000 to support a project led by Sistema New Brunswick at the 5th Canadian Division Support Base Gagetown, and additional projects will be announced in the coming months. according to a VAC press release.

"When Canadians serve our country, their families serve with them. Sistema New Brunswick inspires thousands of children each year. Through the Veteran and Family Well-being Fund, we're expanding their reach with a new program that will benefit the children of military families and Veterans. Across the country, our government is supporting projects like this one, which make a real difference for veterans and their families," said Petitpas Taylor in the press release.

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The Hill Times

Canada veterans statistics

The Hill Times Photograph by Andrew Meade

- There were 97,625 Canadians serving in the Canadian Armed Forces in the spring of 2021 — as members of the Regular Force or Primary Reserve Force—and 461,240 Canadians counted as veterans.
- More than four in 10 veterans were seniors aged 65 years and older, while almost one-third were in the core working age group of 25 to 54 years.
- In 2021, nearly one in six veterans (16.2 per cent), or almost 75,000 veterans, were women.
- In 2021, about one in 20 veterans (5.2 per cent) and currently serving military members living in a private household (5.5 per cent) aged 17 years and older were First Nations, Métis or Inuit.
- Black (2.8 per cent), Chinese (2.5 per cent), South Asian (2.3 per cent), Filipino (1.4 per cent) and Latin American (1.2 per cent) people each accounted for more than one per cent of the currently serving Canadian military personnel in private households in 2021

Source: Canada's Veterans: By the numbers, released by Statistics Canada on Nov. 10, 2023

The struggles faced by veterans include finding employment after leaving the military, coping with multiple injuries, and mental health issues, writes Liberal MP Emmanuel Dubourg. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Our veterans' struggle

Veterans have made the ultimate sacrifice, fighting for our liberty both here and abroad. Yet, they must fight again to receive support from our country.

Liberal MP Emmanuel Dubourg

Opinion

As chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee since 2021, I am deeply moved by the various challenges veterans face daily. They have made the ultimate sacrifice, fighting for our liberty both here and abroad. Yet, they must fight again to receive support from our country.

Their struggles include finding employment after leaving the military, coping with multiple injuries, and facing mental health issues. Many also grapple with homelessness. Additionally, they seek recognition for their participation in the Afghanistan War and Persian Gulf conflict.

The committee plans to study the obstacles facing Canada's Indigenous and Black people in terms of military participation. We have also dedicated significant time to addressing women veterans' issues. Our report, *Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans*, includes 42 recommendations.

Invisible no more

We took precautions during that study due to the emotional pain many witnesses experienced while testifying. Committee members underwent training on how to handle such sensitive situations. We pay tribute to the remarkable courage these women showed in coming forward to testify. We also deeply respect and acknowledge the legitimate choice of those who preferred to remain silent.

The very title of the report, *Invisible No More*, goes to the heart of what our veterans have told us. We believe that the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada are at a turning point in their respective histories. It is essential that these two institutions radically transform the way they treat women who serve, and those who have served. At stake is their ability to ensure the security of the population, and to guarantee quality care for all veterans who find themselves ill or injured after having honourably defended Canada.

Among its 42 recommendations, the committee calls on the Government of Canada to:

• Implement a robust, structured and long-term research program on military women and veterans, in particular, to address the causes of the alarming proportion of military women who are released for medical reasons;

• Apologize to the women who have served and continue to serve in a culture where sexual trauma has gone unpunished for decades; and

• Provide all military personnel with a copy of their medical records prior to their release date;

Transition from military to civilian life

The study showed that the key difficulties associated with the transition to civilian life are related to the capacity of the provinces and territories to provide health care services in a timely manner, particularly access to a family doctor. These difficulties affect all Canadians, and, therefore, the solution to these problems cannot be tailored specifically to veterans.

However, veterans should not be disadvantaged by the fact that doctors will refuse to see them because of the additional burden of VAC forms. In order to work within the boundaries of the federal government's jurisdiction, it is important to optimize what services are offered before CAF members become veterans in the months before they are released. The CAF are solely responsible for health care services provided to serving CAF members, which is the primary avenue for federal government involvement in this area.

One of the four recommendations requests "that the Department of National Defence amend the eligibility criteria for the Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP) vocational rehabilitation program to make it available only to veterans whose medical release was not due to service."

National strategy for veterans' employment

The committee's report is divided into four parts. The first provides statistics on the employment status of Canadian veterans by the numbers, using data collected from surveys on life after military service. The second part provides a summary of employment support programs offered by the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and Veterans Affairs Canada. The third part outlines the programs available through the private and community sectors. The fourth part analyzes the key issues identified in the report's previous sections.

Among 30 recommendations, those two are relevant. First, that the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada establish a system that grants veterans control over their medical records and allows them to be shared seamlessly with civilian doctors, Veterans Affairs Canada and service providers at the veterans' discretion; second, that Veterans Affairs Canada has a role in supporting the releasing military members and finding civilian medical professionals and should work closely with the Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group on this matter.

On the special occasion of Nov. 11, I thank VAC public servants for their ongoing effort, and I salute the courage of our veterans, and I thank them for their sacrifice. Lest we forget.

Liberal MP Emmanuel Dubourg (FCPA, EMBA) was first elected to represent the riding of Bourassa, Que., in 2013. He has served as chair of the House Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs since 2021.

The Hill Times

It's time for our veterans' programs and services to reflect a new generation of vets

Most of today's veterans served in the military after 1954 in peacekeeping and combat roles overseas, and provided aid at home during natural disasters and emergencies, including supporting long-term care homes during the pandemic. *The Hill Times photograph by Sam Garcia*

Today's veterans differ from previous generations, and to honour their service by providing the right supports to meet their needs as they age.

Samir Sinha, John Muscedere & David Pedlar

Opinion

When you think of veterans on Remembrance Day, Nov. 11, what images come to mind? For many Canadians, it might be a visual of the veterans from the two world wars. However, this image does not reflect the vast majority of today's veterans.

Canada has almost half a million veterans, and approximately 66 per cent of them are 55 years of age or older. Only a small fraction are veterans of the Second World War or the Korean War.

Without an updated understanding of who our veterans are and the challenges they face, we cannot fulfill our duty to support their well-being as they age.

A new report, *Addressing the Coming of Age and its Related Complexities Among Canada's Veterans*, highlights that the nature of the military service for today's veterans is vastly different from previous generations of veterans, exposing them to different stressors.

Most of today's veterans served in the military after 1954, engaging in peacekeeping and combat roles overseas—including in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Afghanistan—and provided aid at home during natural disasters and emergencies, including supporting long-term care (LTC) homes early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compared to the general population, this country's veterans released between 1998 and 2018 report higher rates of chronic pain, physical activity limitations, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There is increasing evidence that trauma and PTSD may worsen health, which could put veterans at risk of developing chronic diseases, and becoming frail.

For veterans who are women, Indigenous, racialized, or members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, experiences of sexual abuse, harassment, or systemic discrimination whilst serving in the military can further contribute to or aggravate future health issues.

These health challenges can make ageing at home more challenging, especially if veterans do not have access to family or friends for support.

While veterans' spouses and partners play a critical role in assisting them with daily living activities, almost a quarter of veterans live alone. This raises concerns not only about social isolation, but also the ability of veterans living by themselves to manage in their own homes as they age.

Recognizing the changing demographics of veterans, we need to ensure that we have the most appropriate programs and services in place to meet their needs as they age.

Veterans Affairs Canada has long provided support to help veterans remain in their own homes for as long as possible, including providing financial support for housekeeping, meals, grounds maintenance and personal care services. This not only benefits veterans, but it's also less costly than providing care for them in LTC homes.

To keep up with changing needs, it is time to evolve these programs, including adding more mental health supports tailored to older veterans' needs. We also have to ensure that programs and services recognize and respond in a culturally safe way to the needs of marginalized groups of veterans.

It's time to consider alternatives to traditional LTC homes. For example, an innovative program in the United States allows veterans who are no longer able to care for themselves at home to live in another private residence under the care of a trained caregiver. This is a great example of an innovative way to delay or prevent LTC home admissions.

Furthermore, more education of health-care providers can help them recognize and better respond to the unique health challenges veterans experience.

Just as importantly, we need to focus on identifying issues in military service that can accelerate aging and frailty and make changes to prevent or delay these problems from arising.

The insights we gain from new approaches to veterans' care will not only benefit veterans; they can be applied to all Canadians as they age, helping them remain healthy and able to live at home longer.

It is time to appreciate that today's veterans differ from previous generations, and to honour their service by implementing the right supports to meet their needs as they age.

Dr. Samir Sinha is a geriatrician and the director of health policy research at the National Institute on Ageing. Dr. John Muscedere is scientific director of the Canadian Frailty Network. Dr. David Pedlar is scientific director of the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research.

The Hill Times

Issues facing veterans: moving forward means progress, not perfection

Mental health is not a one-size-fits-all problem, and veterans need to be able to make their own choices when it comes to their experiences.

Dawn McIlmoyle

Opinion

Veterans today are faced with many challenges. The first and often most difficult is the transition out of the military.

Depending on the type of release, different challenges are presented. Some retire and are able to seek employment elsewhere in a field similar to their chosen profession or a leadership role, while others are medically released and have their own sets of issues.

The loss of identity, comradery, and purpose can be quite devastating to a person's mental health. The military builds you up with quotes like "There is no 'I' in team," and "No one left behind," and "I got your six (back)." After being released, you suddenly find yourself very alone, and quite often misunderstood.

People hear the word 'veteran', and they expect an elderly man who fought in the Second World War. In the past, veterans came home from war and were greeted with parades, given land grants, and treated like heroes. They were looked after; they were treated with honour and respect. Today's veterans have been told they did not go to war; they were in peacekeeping roles, or they were involved in a conflict which is not the same as war and do not deserve the same entitlements. In the last few years, veterans across Canada have been told "They are asking for too much." They have been offered MAID for mental health issues, and they have had to sue to government for proper recognition of significant issues.

In the United States, they meet the veteran where they're at when it comes to mental health. They have federal, state, and local veteran organizations. In Canada, we have Veterans Affairs which is federal, and we have the Legion, which is now mostly run by civilians, and is not the agency it once was.

In Canada, veterans are told what programs they can take, and are not able to seek their own assistance. It must be Health Canada approved or regulated. They have programs they fund, and those are the ones from which veterans must choose. Mental health is not a one-size-fits-all problem. Veterans need to be able to make their own choice when it comes to their experiences, and not have programs forced on them so that they feel like cash cows. There have been more and more agencies popping up to assist veterans with their disability paperwork that charge veterans a portion of their disability. Veterans with mental health struggles are vulnerable and already hurting. To hurt them more because of money is shameful.

Finding a job after release, a purpose for your pain, and the sense of self that was lost when you joined the military usually while balancing a family often leads to divorce, separation, and further impacts a veteran's mental health. Asking for help when you are the helper can be extremely hard, and some veterans no longer wish to burden their families and die by suicide. Veterans with mental health issues are also at risk of being homeless, and if they do have a job, its usually not for long, setting them up for personal disappointment.

With Remembrance Day upon us, I would like to take this opportunity to share some things that have assisted me with my mental health journey. I have learned to share my experiences in a positive way, and to be grateful for them. I have learned that to "keep moving forward" means progress, not perfection. I have sought out like-minded individuals, and connections in my community. I have got comfortable with being uncomfortable, and am learning to love myself again. I learned it was ok to have feelings, to have emotions, and I learned it was ok to want help for myself, I was not just here to help others. In order for me to help others to the best of my ability, I needed to help myself.

Veterans today have many issues; however, they have a lot to be proud of. It's time to concentrate on the good, and to see them for who they are: The ones who want to and were willing to make a difference.

Dawn McIlmoyle is a veteran, registered nurse, advocate, mother, and grandmother. She enjoys spending time with her service dog, Dutchess Vom Dee. McIlmoyle was named one of the Top 20 Women in Defence for 2024, and was also recently named a Paul Harris Fellow by the Kawartha Rotary Club.

The Hill Times

Veterans Affairs Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor, pictured on the Hill. Veterans advocate Sean Bruyea says pension problems and care for veterans still persist today, and that Veterans Affairs Canada needs effective oversight. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Canada's must-do list, not a wish-list for veterans

Canadians cannot renege on the contract was understood when we joined the armed forces, that the government would care for and compensate us for our losses in a manner that allows us to live in dignity, fairness, and prosperity.

Sean Bruyea

Opinion

This will be my 25th Remembrance Day advocating for injured serving members, veterans, and their families. Some things have improved, while others remain unchanged. Sadly, we have witnessed a regressive repeat of the sad legacies and past neglect of those in uniform who have sacrificed so much so that we can live our lives of prosperity, dignity, and peace.

Remembrance Day focuses so much on the past that we often forget or—equally harmfully—idealize the living sacrifices in our midst.

This was the case after the First World War. Canada created majestically enduring monuments to the fallen, casting a shadow over destitute and homeless veterans. Our legacy was one of veterans struggling with a parsimonious pension system while less-wounded soldiers had to make do with lump-sum disability payments and a handshake. Charities often took up the slack, but could be whimsical and—in many cases—mean-spirited. The Pension Board could unilaterally remove a veteran's pension for "the man's own good" if the board suspected a psychological injury was the cause of unemployment.

The nuances have changed, but Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) today suffers from overwork with too few employees, too little money, and too much Treasury Board and policy paperwork that hinder frontline workers from making time-sensitive decisions. Meanwhile, charities have become the crutch of VAC policy failures, while passing the hot potato of veteran care to for-profit companies demeans veterans' sacrifices, given to a nation and our system of government, not to a corporation.

Persistent pension application backlogs continue after more than five years, improvements to legislation and programs have taken decades as government adopts changes piecemeal so as to keep costs down. Many recommendations made by Parliament remain in cobwebs after almost 15 years. Government even makes changes so large as to save billions of dollars at the expense of disabled veterans and their families.

We have forgotten what we did so well after the Second World War. By 1945, a comprehensive plan was in place for more than one million veterans who were given re-establishment benefits as a "right" not discretionary benefits vulnerable to capricious fiscal planning. In 1944, then-prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King told the House of Commons: "Charity is a nauseating thing.... What is to be done will be done as a matter of right."

Any Canadian who joins the military faces the most punitive legal obligations of any profession. False equivalencies with emergency services cannot obscure that no other profession can be ordered into harm's way knowing full well that loss of life may result. Yet, there is not a single legal obligation that Canada's government has towards veterans.

Depending on the military operation, up to 32 per cent of those who served cannot engage in suitable gainful employment, up to 49 per cent suffer a psychological injury, and up to 90 per cent suffer a lifelong, disabling injury. These are horrific war-casualty stats. More needs to be done to honour their sacrifice.

First: Let's start with a duty to inform and even care for all our veterans and their families in accordance with their circumstances. There is one thing all parliamentarians, veterans, and their families can agree upon: programs for veterans and their families are extremely complex and often difficult to access, especially for the more disabled. Let us reciprocate their sacrifices and dedication in uniform with at least this one small obligation. Accessing benefits should not be a journey of an orphaned Oliver Twist pleading "Please, sir, I want some more" from a system often structured to prevent compassion.

Second: VAC needs effective oversight. As the only federal department headquartered outside of Ottawa, the department has benefitted from being isolated from the rest of the public service and the oversight agencies which might otherwise keep a closer eye on more than 40 years of managerial and policy development shenanigans.

Oversight requires independent advisory groups with experts not employed by or beholden to the government. Their proceedings and reports must be made public. We did this in the Second World War with 14 subcommittees ultimately reporting to Canada's most powerful ministers.

The longstanding calls for a legislated Veterans' Ombudsman need action, and the least we can do to hold VAC accountable. The ombudsman should not directly transfer from institutionalized military life into the procedural quagmire that often manifests in the public service. Objectivity and sympathy become compromised.

Third: Veterans' legislation and policy must be created openly and transparently, not hidden in budget omnibus bills, and convincing Treasury Board to forego consultations on regulations, and bullying opposition to prevent debate in the House of Commons.

Fourth: VAC must implement what Parliament recommends, especially when it comes to improving the well-being of veterans and their families. The most disabled have entered old age and some have even died waiting for compensation for their income losses to bring them to a level consistent with the annual incentives and promotions had they not been kicked out of the military. Parliament recommended this in 2010, the Ombudsman recommended this in 2014, 2017, and 2020, and a host of individuals and groups recommended this since.

This is not a wish-list for an annual policy study, it is a necessity. Canadians cannot renege on the contract we all understood when we joined: Canada would care for us and compensate for our losses in a manner that allows us to live in dignity, fairness, prosperity, and, hopefully, at peace with the nation we lost so much to defend.

Sean Bruyea is an author, retired Air Force intelligence officer, and frequent commentator on government, military, and veterans' issues. Bruyea is the lead plaintiff in a class action against the government for failing to include some of the most disabled veterans in properly advising them about and therefore not receiving the full amount of a retirement lump-sum payable by Veterans Affairs Canada.

The Hill Times

The simple poppy: a reminder of the universality of sacrifice

People place their poppies on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, on Nov. 11, 2019. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Service is service, the blood of all heroes never dies, and our remembrance of all veterans should be equally enduring regardless of the nature of their wounds.

Fardous Hosseiny

Opinion

In Flanders Fields by the late-Canadian physician lieutenant-colonel John McCrae may be the most widely known poem that honours the lives of those who have served. It continues to be heard in Remembrance Day services around the world, and is a source of inspiration in countless ways for the duty we, as the living, have to honour the sacrifice of the fallen who gave their lives in war.

There is a lesser-known poem also inspired by this piece that has its own origin story of how the symbol of the poppy came to be an enduring sign of remembrance.

Moina Michael was an American woman so moved hearing this poem that she wrote a response called *We Shall Keep the Faith*, made a personal pledge vowing to wear a red poppy as remembrance. She began producing artificial poppies, and then used the funds raised from this initiative to support ex-servicemen returning from the First World War. Her initiative caught the eye and was promoted by Frenchwoman Anna E. Guerin, adopted by the Royal British Legion in 1921 for the first ever Poppy Appeal that Nov. 11, and then by Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. As a result, the poppy has been a symbol of remembrance worldwide for more than 100 years. Think about the impact of that as we see the poppy funds today!

The second stanza of her response is particularly beautiful, and in my mind instructive more than a century after she penned it on the back of a used envelope:

We cherish too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,

As I don my own poppy this year, I think about what a difference one person can make in continuing to honour what can feel at times so very far removed from our present day lives. Be that McCrae, Michael, or Guerin's contribution to how a simple poppy came to be the ongoing symbol of remembrance around the world, or what perhaps we can contribute in modern times individually. Because, truthfully, the reality is it is not that far removed at all if we ask ourselves a timeless question "in remembrance, who might be the forgotten?"

Here in Canada we know that more than 118,000 brave soldiers did not return home to their loved ones throughout our short history of a nation. Canada's eight Books of Remembrance, which record the names of every Canadian who died in service to our country, are currently displayed at Parliament Hill's Visitor Welcome Centre, in the Room of Remembrance.

Something which we have recently become aware is that not all who have served find themselves remembered in death. For instance, burial sites and grave markers. This may simply be because of a lack of awareness of available programs, perhaps there were many years between their service and time of passing, or even that they hadn't considered themselves a veteran by definition. Some have simply never been identified. It is important that education around this happens so all who have served are recognized with headstones honouring their service, including those who historically have served. There is a program through Veterans Affairs and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that ensures the maintenance of more than 300,000 markers and grave sites of Canadian Armed Forces members here and around the world, including those whose deaths were not directly attributed to services. It is particularly meaningful to know this exists where some might have fallen into disrepair, or where no living relative remain to continue to provide for the upkeep thus ensuring these gravesites are maintained throughout time.

Whether they lie marked in Flanders, Bény-sur-Mer, Beechwood, or unmarked throughout the world, these are heroes, and these are places where valour has led. We must remember all, and their lives and their service must be honoured.

While there is an official count of the war dead, there is growing recognition of a number not accounted for; those lost to their psychological wounds incurred as a result of service. As conversations become more open and honest about mental health, and how this has been a real impact of service, when we lose a former service person—or current serving—to suicide, the question many grapple with now is how do we officially honour those lives? It is welcome to see this year's Memorial Cross Mother (also known as Silver Cross Mother) recognized for her loss of two sons to the impacts of post traumatic stress disorder.

At the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families the feedback we hear from our community is that mental health injuries are no different than the physical injuries which our Veterans incur, and should be treated as such. The impact is equal and they are no less heroes than those who died in uniform. As such it is imperative to honour them in equal measure of remembrance.

As we expand our remembrance practices to include all types of injuries, we have an opportunity to become leaders in advocating for comprehensive recognition of Veterans' sacrifices.

Beyond that, our responsibility as Canadians does not end on Remembrance Day—it extends into everyday acts of awareness, support, and education around the complex realities of military service. There is no differentiation. We can make that statement unequivocally and stand with our veterans and family members in honouring their loved ones on Nov. 11 who died both in service and post service as a result of their injuries sustained.

Perhaps, inspired by the enduring symbol of the poppy and the difference one can make, we can move forward with a renewed understanding: service is service, and the blood of all heroes never dies and our remembrance of all should be equally enduring regardless of the nature of their wounds.

Fardous Hosseiny is president and CEO of the Atlas Institute.

The Hill Times

Veterans, mental health, and the service dog connection

Operation Service Dog has provided over $2-million to help train and pair over 61 veterans with service dogs, with 27 more on the way.

Nujma Bond

Opinion

Standard poodle Caliber, left, is a service dog paired with retired CAF veteran Kenda Doody, centre. German shepherd service dog Cora, right, is paired with retired RCMP veteran Ed Brake. *Photos courtesy of Fire Team K9 Service Dogs*

The Royal Canadian Legion has long been advocating for government-led national training standards for service dogs—amazing animals that provide a lifeline for Canadian Armed Forces and Royal Canadian Mounted Police veterans living with operational stress injuries such as post traumatic stress disorder, or physical injury.

Canada still doesn't have any such standards. Why does it matter? It's summarized in the words of one retired RCMP veteran, Ed Brake. A former staff sergeant and head of the RCMP's police motorcycle unit in Ottawa, Brake has lived with a German shepherd service dog named Cora for about two years. Cora was trained through a program recognized by Wounded Warriors Canada (WWC).

"I've already seen the benefits of having a true certified service dog," he explains. Not only because of the support they provide, but also "because there's a ton of fakes, and it makes a difference." He also says legitimate dogs are regularly questioned—and it can be an uncomfortable experience.

It's not that there has been an overt lack of willingness to develop national guidelines in Canada. The federal government took on this task and was close to getting there as far back as 2018, but the effort ended rather abruptly and has seemingly been abandoned. The reason? The legion learned it was too difficult to reach a consensus among affected parties, including well-meaning yet disparate groups that run training programs.

If fulsome national consultations have occurred, surely an expert panel can be convened, a plan developed, and standards put in place in relatively short order. Not everyone will agree, but common sense must prevail. Canada already has national standards and regulations for many things that affect health and well-being.

Upholding standards and providing related ID-cards would make it much easier for the general public to recognize a certified service animal. It would assist airlines, eating establishments, workplaces, and others. It could also help make it possible for organizations including the legion—and possibly Veterans Affairs Canada—to direct funding to veterans for the costly feeding and caring of dogs; knowing the animals and their owners have accredited training, and the dogs are considered an official treatment element.

Currently, the legion's Ontario Command leads a program called Operation Service Dog, and through its collaboration with WWC, has provided over $2-million to help train and pair over 61 veterans with service dogs, with 27 more on the way. The legion's Quebec Command is set to begin a similar relationship. Because WWC developed a set of standards, they could potentially be applied across the country today—pending modifications that might be needed. The framework exists and has been tested.

Caliber—fondly known as Cali—is a standard poodle, a service dog paired with now-retired CAF veteran Kenda Doody two years ago after a suggestion from a health-care provider. They became a "team" last November. A former combat veteran, Doody describes the relationship this way: "[Cali] has been making me 'soft' again," she says, having become 'hard,' unapproachable, angry, and isolated after living through traumatic experiences while serving in the forces.

These animals can provide reassurance, reduce anxiety, and make a more "normal" life possible—literally taking some veterans from their basements back into society. Our country needs to take action to make it easier for our veterans to receive and maintain a qualified service dog as part of their treatment plan. Here's a three-step plan to consider:

- Create national standards for service dogs for veterans (and for the wider public in tandem while we're at it), recognizing dogs as a regulated option in the treatment mix for veterans;
- Provide financial support to help veterans maintain the health of their dogs where required, through a simple easy to follow process; and
- Implement new regulations swiftly having received agreement on any required synergies with all provinces and territories.

In the words of RCMP veteran Brake: "My life has been changed since I received Cora." And from CAF veteran Doody about Cali: "I have to take care of her because she takes care of me … she's like my child, but with fur." Enough said.

The Royal Canadian Legion asks for tangible action—not in two years, five years, 10 years, or after countless new reports. With willingness and a concerted collective effort, including by the Legion, this could happen pretty quickly. Let's just get it done.

Nujma Bond is a national spokesperson for the Royal Canadian Legion. She holds a BSc, BJ, and in a previous role oversaw communications for the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

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Ensuring equity: veterans who are women deserve more than to be 'no longer invisible'

Women are veterans with their own unique experiences, needs, and voices. Instead of gender-blindness, we need to update military/RCMP and veteran policies to remove existing legacy biases.

Maya Eichler, Karen Breeck & Sayward Montague

Opinion

Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister of the commemoration and public affairs branch of the Department of Veterans Affairs, spoke to the House Veterans Affairs Committee on Dec. 7, 2023, during a meeting to discuss the experiences of women veterans. *ParlVu screencapture*

This week marks the first Remembrance Day since the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs published its report *Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans*. Released on June 12, 2024, this report is the result of both the longest and only study dedicated to women in the committee's history.

Its 42 recommendations call for concrete actions from Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), the Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces, and the RCMP. This was the first concerted effort by government to acknowledge and address the specific needs of military/RCMP veteran women.

Even though women have participated in all of Canada's wars, they have rarely been treated as equal veterans—neither by VAC, no society, or their male peers. Historically, women were excluded from all combat positions, and were primarily recruited into military support roles. This firmly tied soldiering to men and masculinity. Veteran commemoration and benefits were thus largely built on the presumed norm that veterans are men.

The 1970 Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada created pressure to end sex and gender discrimination, including in the

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Broken promises: veterans left waiting for adequate lifelong pensions

Veterans Affairs must adopt a 'one veteran-one standard' approach to improve legislation to address the financial and wellness requirements of the veterans' community, particularly concerning pensions for life.

It's unacceptable that we continue to have veterans' legislation in Canada that provides a much higher level of compensation to a veteran injured before 2006 compared to a veteran injured after that date, writes Brian Forbes. *The Hill Times photograph by Sam Garcia*

Brian Forbes

Opinion

Nearly a decade after the federal government pledged to restore lifelong pensions for injured veterans, many veterans and their families are still waiting for the financial security they deserve.

The National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada (NCVA) holds the position that Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) must adopt a "one veteran-one standard" approach to improve veterans legislation so as to address the financial and wellness requirements of Canada's veterans' community. This is particularly so with respect to the pension for life provisions formally implemented in April 2019.

In our considered opinion, this pension for life policy fails to satisfy the prime minister's initial commitment in 2015, in response to the Equitas lawsuit, to address the inadequacies and deficiencies in the New Veterans Charter/Veterans Wellbeing Act (NVC/VWA), and continues to ignore the elephant in the room that has overshadowed this entire discussion.

As stated in our many submissions to VAC and Parliament, the government has not met veterans' expectations with regard to the fundamental mandated commitment to "reestablish lifelong pensions" under the Charter to ensure that a comparable level of financial security is provided to all disabled veterans and their families over their life course, regardless of where or when they were injured. This financial disparity between the Pension Act and NVC/VWA compensation was validated by the Parliamentary Budget Office's report in February 2019, which underlined this longstanding discrimination.

It is unacceptable that we continue to have veterans' legislation in Canada that provides a significantly higher level of compensation to a veteran injured before 2006—the date of enactment of the New Veterans Charter—when compared to a veteran injured post2006. If applied to the Afghanistan conflict, this discrimination results in veterans of the same war having totally different pension benefits.

It has been NCVA's consistent recommendation to the minister and to the department that VAC should adopt the major conclusions of the ministerial policy advisory group (MPAG) report presented to the national stakeholder summit in Ottawa in October 2016—and to various ministers since—together with the recommendations contained in the NCVA legislative programs.

Both of these reports proposed combining the best provisions of the Pension Act and of the NVC/VWA, resulting in a comprehensive pension compensation and wellness model that would treat all veterans with parallel disabilities in the same manner, and eliminate the artificial cutoff dates that arbitrarily distinguish veterans based on whether they were injured before or after 2006.

This is not a question of choosing between wellness and financial compensation, but rather blending the overall veterans legislative schemes to harmonize the impact of the reestablishment programs for medically released veterans and their families.

NCVA takes the position that financial security remains a fundamental necessity to successfully adopting any wellness or rehabilitation strategy. To achieve this, we have continually encouraged VAC to prioritize the major recommendations of the MPAG as fundamental building blocks to establish the initial components of our proposed model.

This would involve the enhancement of the Income Replacement Benefit as a single stream of income for life based on a progressive future loss of income concept, to correspond with what the disabled veteran would have earned in their military career if they had not been injured. This would also involve the addition of Exceptional Incapacity Allowance, the establishment of a new caregivers allowance and a new monthly family benefit for life in accordance with the Pension Act.

The NCVA and veterans at large will be closely scrutinizing the election platforms of all federal leaders to determine which party will commit to addressing the shortfalls and inequities that still exist in veterans legislation. There are hundreds of thousands of veterans in Canada today and, when family, friends and supporters are considered, this number of potential voters is not without significance.

After years of broken promises, it is essential that the government and opposition parties seize the moment to satisfy the financial needs of Canadian veterans and their dependants. In so doing, Parliament would finally be recognizing that the long-standing social covenant between the Canadian people and the veterans' community demands nothing less.

Brian Forbes is chair of the National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada, and chair of the Executive Committee of The War Amps.

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Ensuring equity: veterans who are women deserve more than to be 'no longer invisible'

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military. As a result, military colleges were forced to admit women, and married or pregnant women were no longer excluded from joining or staying in the military. Almost 20 years later, in 1989, a Human Rights Tribunal Decision forced the military to lift the combat ban on women.

Despite these legal changes, the government of the day chose not to set aside the necessary resources to create favourable conditions for women to serve. Accommodations, equipment, uniforms, and benefits were not formally updated. Female-specific occupational and environmental medical care research, policy, standards, and training were not put in place.

Instead, in the 1990s, the Canadian military was encouraged to adopt a gender-neutral, or—more accurately—a gender-blind approach that assumed "a soldier is a soldier is a soldier." Later, VAC and male-dominated veteran service organizations adopted the language of "one veteran, one standard," even if this existing standard would better serve men than women.

Government assertions of equality and sameness made military women's experiences and needs invisible—whether experiences related to the military's gendered culture, or sex-specific needs related to pregnancy, postpartum, or menopause.

Women veterans have fought—and continue to fight—hard to change inequities in military and veteran policies. This Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA) study continued this trend, spurring a new wave of women veteran advocacy and mobilization. More than 60 women veterans came forward to testify at the committee, or to submit a brief.

The testimonies by military and RCMP veteran women exposed past and present sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence. They challenged existing military/RCMP and veteran policies, as well as parliamentary business as usual. Many of those testifying called out the lack of trauma-informed witness-centric practices. They also called out the tendency among some MPs to politicize and politically exploit women veterans and their issues.

Women veterans are veterans—not lesser veterans. And yet, they are not the same as veteran men.

Women are veterans with their own unique experiences, needs, and voices. Instead of gender-blindness, we need to update military/RCMP and veteran policies to remove existing legacy biases that continue to cause preventable harm, and inequitable health and well-being outcomes for some servicewomen when compared to veteran men and civilian women.

And to do that, we need a comprehensive national servicewoman and woman veteran research strategy, as recommended by the committee.

Swift government implementation of the recommendations of the women veteran ACVA report is a means to this end. It is up to our self-proclaimed "feminist" government to ensure the promise of Parliamentarians is realized.

Women veterans deserve more than being "no longer invisible." They deserve equitable supports, benefits, and participation in Canada's key institutions.

This Remembrance Day, let's ensure once and for all that women veterans are recognized as veterans in their own right.

And yes … those medals are their own.

Maya Eichler, Karen Breeck, and Sayward Montague are co-chairs of the Women Veterans Research and Engagement Network.

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