

Minister
of Veterans Affairs



Ministre
des Anciens Combattants

Mr. Bryan May, MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs
131 Queen Street, 6th Floor
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. May:

I am pleased to provide a Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs' Third Report entitled, *Backlog of Disability Benefit Claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs*.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and the members of the Standing Committee for your work and dedication toward finding solutions related to the backlog of disability applications - a major challenge facing Veterans, still serving CAF members, former RCMP members and their families. As an outcome of the testimony, I understand your concern in the current status of wait times and in particular the amount of Veterans' disability benefits applications beyond the 16 week service standard. I am also unsatisfied and I am committed to deliver solutions to resolve this issue. Reducing wait times for disability benefit applications is the number one priority.

Since 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada has seen a 68% increase in applications for Disability Benefits, including an increase of more than 124% in first applications. While VAC has made several improvements along the way, it has not allowed the Department to keep pace with the increased demand in applications.

With progress being made, I would like to speak to what is being done to reduce wait times. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to reducing wait times, that is why it was paramount to develop a strategic plan - *Timely Disability Benefit Decisions – Strategic Directions for Improving Wait Times* - which includes a multi-faceted approach focusing on four main lines of effort. The lines of effort are public service capacity, integration, process innovation and digital solutions. This plan is the foundation and VAC will continue to update and develop solutions with this in mind.

Some of the main initiatives developed, related to the plan that are expected to reduce wait times include:

- Investing \$192 million through the 2020 Economic and Fiscal update which included hiring and retaining 540 trained temporary staff. Spike Teams were established to work on the most common applications, and customized training was completed in January 2021 allowing the new adjudicators to start making decisions. In fact, with these resources, VAC will adjudicate an additional 90,400 applications by early 2022, than it would have had these resources not been in place.
- Setting up Veteran Benefit Teams (VBT) where staff work in a more collaborative manner to reduce the number of times a file changes hands thereby reducing the overarching time it takes to process an application. The pilot of the VBTs had an approximate 10% increase in productivity. VAC expects similar results as this initiative is expanded and will be monitoring this progress.
- Expanding collaboration with Veterans, CAF members, former RCMP members and their families through the Innovation Hub and the Let's Talk Veterans platform to inform and improve the applications process through their feedback from their experiences in applying.
- Analyzing ways to increase efficiency by leveraging automation and digital enhancements. There has been extensive research through the Innovation Hub related to Hearing Loss and Tinnitus, the first and second most commonly applied for conditions. VAC is looking into automating key aspects of this decision making process to increase productivity for these types of claims and allow staff to focus on more complex claims – which tend to be the most common beyond the service standard.

All-in-all, VAC is starting to see progress in reducing the number of applications beyond the service standard. This positive trend comes through a lot of hard work and planning. VAC understood that no single process would solve the current challenges, but by approaching solutions from the different pillars, VAC is affecting positive change. I have no doubt that with continued support and new solutions, wait times will be reduced significantly and the number of applications beyond the service standard will be reduced to approximately 5,000 by early 2022.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lawrence MacAulay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "L".

The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, PC, MP

c.c.: Benoit Jolicoeur, Clerk, Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

The word "Canada" in a serif font, with a small red and white Canadian flag icon positioned above the letter "a".