

Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs Seventh Report *Fairness in the Services Offered to Francophone, Women and 2SLGBTQ+ Veterans*

The Government of Canada (Government) welcomes the opportunity to respond to recommendations made in the seventh report of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA). The Government would like to thank both ACVA, for this report, as well as the witnesses who appeared before ACVA.

The Government is continuing its efforts to ensure that the services offered to all Veterans, including Francophone, Women and 2SLGBTQ+ Veterans, are provided in a fair and equitable manner.

The Government is pleased to provide a response to ACVA's recommendations, which are aligned with the significant efforts that have already been made, and that continue to be made, by the Government to address the disparities in service delivery.

ACVA Recommendation 1

That Veterans Affairs Canada implement a process that prioritizes applications submitted in French, just as it successfully did for applications submitted by women.

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

For the 2021-2022 fiscal year, the average processing times for English and French first applications were 36.9 and 45.2 weeks, respectively. This is a difference of 8.3 weeks.

Approximately 15% of the disability benefit applications received by the Department are in French. Because of their smaller number relative to the number of English applications, each one has a larger impact on the average French turnaround time (i.e., a larger impact than one English application would have on the average English turnaround time). There are proportionately more French claims among the oldest files, so as VAC prioritizes the oldest claims in the backlog the gap will continue for a while.

The Department has already made progress, thanks to efforts such as increasing the number of French and bilingual decision making staff. Now, approximately 30% of the Department's staff that are currently making disability benefit decisions are either French or bilingual. Additionally, the Department recently hired more bilingual and French decision makers who are currently in training. Although it will take time, with the additional resources, the Department expects to see further reductions in the processing times for French applications.

In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, an average of 320 French first applications were completed per month. In comparison, in 2021-2022, the average increased to 540 per month. Additionally, in the first quarter of 2019-2020 (April 1 to June 30), the average turnaround time, for French first applications was 55.0 weeks. By the end of the fourth quarter of 2021-2022 (January 1 to March 31), the turnaround time reduced to 43.5 weeks, which is a difference of 11.5 weeks.

ACVA Recommendation 2

That Veterans Affairs Canada compile and make publicly available, in summary reports, disaggregated data by quarter on the processing time of first applications for disability benefits submitted in English, in French, by a male Veteran and by a female Veteran, as well as the number of applications submitted by each group per quarter.

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

The Department updates the [Disability Benefit Processing – Summary Report](#) after every quarter within the fiscal year. This report is available on the Department's website. Starting in the first quarter of the 2021-2022 fiscal year, the processing times (average and median) for

first applications were added for French, English, female, male, RCMP and Canadian Armed Forces (both serving and Veterans).

The next release of the summary report (capturing the first quarter of 2022-2023) is scheduled to be released before September 30, 2022 and will be expanded to include the number of applications submitted by each group identified above, as well as the number completed within each quarter.

ACVA Recommendation 3

That Veterans Affairs Canada offer full-time permanent positions, instead of temporary ones, to employees responsible for processing disability benefit applications.

Government Response

VAC partially agrees with this recommendation.

Between 2015-2016 and 2021-2022, VAC experienced a 47% increase in the number of applications received for disability benefits. VAC also began to see the number of applications over the service standard grow (that is, the backlog).

During this time, the government announced temporary funding for VAC on a number of occasions to hire staff to address the growing number of pending applications. However, the introduction of new benefits and improvements to others, increased communications and awareness campaigns for My VAC Account during this time appear to have resulted in an unexpected increase in the number of disability benefits applications received by the Department. As a result, even with the additional staff, the Department was not able to keep up with the increase in applications.

The additional resources hired in summer/fall of 2020 have been instrumental. These new team members began making decisions in January 2021, and by March 31, 2022, the Department had reduced the backlog by approximately 50%, compared to the Spring of 2020. To maintain this momentum, on February 23, 2022, the Government announced funding of \$139.6 million over two years to extend the temporary positions as part of the action to reduce processing times for disability benefit applications at VAC. By spring/summer 2023, the Department expects to be processing disability benefit applications within the publicly reported service standard.

The service standard target for disability benefits is for 80 percent of decisions to be made within 16 weeks for first applications and reassessments (review as to whether the condition has worsened) and within 12 weeks for departmental reviews (review to confirm or change an original decision). By spring/summer 2023, the Department expects to have cut the number of applications waiting longer than our service standard to about 5,000 provided application intake levels stay consistent. Additionally, as the Department decreases the backlog even further, the processing times for both female and Francophone applications is expected to be closer to parity.

The Department is also developing more efficient application and decision-making processes using digital technologies. Budget 2021 provided \$10M to develop automation for the conditions of hearing loss and tinnitus.

This is a planned multi-year, multi-phased initiative focusing the use of technology to minimize administrative work, alleviate repetitive tasks, improve information sharing, improve client experience, and enhance collaboration in the disability benefits process. This Phase 1 of work will be completed by September 30, 2022. Key work has focused upon developing a computer-assisted tool to search and produce evidence bundles for decision makers and the design of an online portal that will allow health care providers to directly submit documents and reports in digital format to the department.

In the 2022 report, *Processing Disability Benefits for Veterans*, the Auditor General recommended the following:

Veterans Affairs Canada should work with central government agencies to establish a sustainable long-term resourcing plan for processing disability benefit applications in a timely manner. This plan should consider the number of applications the department expects to receive and the efficiency it expects to gain from its process improvement initiatives.

The Department agrees with this recommendation and is working with central agencies to monitor progress and assess evolving needs.

ACVA Recommendation 4

That Veterans Affairs Canada publish the average and median total wait time for first applications for disability benefits from the date the application is received to the date, in the case of a favourable decision, payment is issued, or, in the case of an unfavourable decision, the date the decision is communicated to the Veteran.

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

As of April 1, 2022, the Department has started collecting the data needed to clarify the definition of 'processing time' for the purpose of the service standard. Beginning in the fiscal year 2022-2023, the processing time will represent the time between when VAC receives a complete application and when a payment is made. A completed application is required to begin calculating the processing time as the Department often receives applications that are considered incomplete. To address this, VAC will update the disability benefits application form and implement communications tools, such as online videos and enhanced drop down menus to better explain what is required for an application to be ready for a decision/complete.

As stated above, the Department updates the [Disability Benefit Processing – Summary Report](#) after every quarter within the fiscal year. This summary report is available on the Department's website. The next release of the summary report (capturing the first quarter of 2022-2023 which runs from April 1, 2022 to June 30, 2022) is scheduled to be released before September 30, 2022 and will be expanded to include the average and median total wait time for first applications for disability benefits and will apply the new 'processing time' to calculate these results.

Most important, the Department continues to track its progress towards achieving its stated service standard. VAC's service standard for disability benefit applications is 16 weeks for first applications and reassessments, and 12 weeks for departmental reviews, 80% of the time. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, the Department received 40% more disability benefit applications, including an increase of more than 75% in first applications, and with the increase in intake there was a corresponding decrease in service standard performance. However, with increased investment and effort, in 2021-2022, the Department achieved a service standard rate of 46% for first applications, compared to 23% in 2019-2020. There has also been progress in the service standard for French applications. The percentage of French first applications within the service standard increased from 26% in 2020-21 to 41% in 2021-22. The Department expects that this progress will continue as the number of applications beyond the service standard is further reduced.

ACVA Recommendation 5

That Veterans Affairs Canada implement in their entirety the recommendations listed in the Auditor General's 2022 Report 2 - Processing Disability Benefits for Veterans.

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

VAC knows that current processing times for disability benefits are unacceptable and reducing them remains VAC's top priority. The Department welcomes the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) report, agrees with each of the four recommendations and is committed to addressing

each one. In fact, this audit supports the very issues VAC have been working on over the last few years to reduce processing times for Veterans.

The Department has already made progress on the OAG recommendations. For example, VAC has started working with the RCMP to create better processes for forecasting the financial requirements of VAC administering disability benefits for RCMP clients. Beginning in the fiscal year 2022-2023, all reported turnaround times and service standard results for disability benefits will represent the time between when the Department receives a complete application and when a payment is made (for favourable decisions). The development of a data dictionary for data stored in the data warehouse is in progress. Additionally, VAC is continuing to explore options for the long-term stabilization of the Department's workforce which in turn, will help make more timely decisions.

ACVA Recommendation 6

That Veterans Affairs Canada expand and enhance the Office of Women and LGBTQ2+ Veterans to better identify and address systemic issues and continue holding annual Women Veterans Forums to bring together Veterans, researchers, experts and organizational leaders to discuss specific challenges facing women and how Veterans Affairs Canada can continue to improve supports and services tailored to these Veterans.

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

VAC is committed to work to identify and address systemic issues for women and 2SLGBTQ+ Veterans by strengthening connections with women and 2SLGBTQ+ Veteran stakeholders, hosting public forums to bring together Veterans, researchers, experts and organizational leaders to discuss systemic challenges, and embedding intersectional perspectives in VAC's policies, programs, services, and processes.

In 2019, VAC launched the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans, which has departmental functional responsibility for Gender-based Analysis (GBA) Plus and shared responsibility to implement VAC's GBA Plus Strategy. The Office's principal aims are to work collaboratively with the Department and with internal and external partners and stakeholders to: identify systemic barriers and inequities impacting women and LGBTQ2 Veterans; facilitate solutions in areas where systemic improvements are possible; provide VAC staff with access to tools, training and awareness of GBA Plus and how it can be used to support gender inclusive services and systems; and engage with women and 2SLGBTQ+ Veteran stakeholders on service-related issues having unique impacts on these sub-populations.

After being formally announced in March 2020, the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans, with a staff of 4-5 positions, has quickly evolved in its scope of responsibility: assuming the role as departmental functional lead in support of the Government of Canada's Modernization of Sex and Gender Information Practices project. The role of the Office continues to grow and evolve with increased involvement in whole-of-government initiatives such as enhanced disaggregated data collection and analysis, the Gender-based Violence Strategy and National Action Plan, and the consultations for the first ever LGBTQ2 Federal Action Plan, with greater collaboration both internal to VAC as well as with other federal partners and Veteran stakeholder communities.

As part of its efforts to identify and address systemic issues, VAC hosted the first Annual Women Veterans Forum, on May 23, 2019, in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island bringing together Veterans, active members of the CAF and the RCMP, subject matter experts, ministerial advisory group members, community leaders and government agencies to facilitate meaningful discussions about challenges women Veterans may face. Since that time, VAC has expanded efforts to identify, share information on, and address systemic issues by hosting the 2020 Virtual Series, in which the Women Veterans Forum Update was enriched by expanding conversations with other historically underrepresented groups through a roundtable with Veterans and stakeholders from the LGBTQ2 community. Forum participants shared their

experiences and perspectives on the systemic barriers in accessing relevant services – including a lack of disaggregated data on Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans, the lack of research on the experiences of female and gender diverse Veterans, as well as the need for trauma-sensitive training for VAC staff members. The perspectives shared through this process provide important information about how programs, policies and practices are shaping the lives of those impacted. Work is underway now to fulfill the expectations of an annual forum centered on women Veterans and LGBTQ2+ Veterans.

ACVA Recommendation 7

That Veterans Affairs Canada provide all its employees with training on the LGBT purge in order to educate them about the unique trauma experienced by Veterans who were victims of this institutional discrimination.

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

VAC has continued to recognize the impacts of gender and sexual identity on the military and Veteran experience working towards the goal that Veterans with different gender identities – including women and gender diverse Veterans– are not experiencing inequities in systems, services, and commemorations, the organization has continued to strengthen training on GBA Plus, LGBTQ2 Cultural Competency, and the lived experiences of LGBT Purge survivors.

For example, since 2020, VAC has:

- Recognized the need to continue to build the historical and cultural competency of staff through inclusivity training. Since 2020, staff at VAC have been encouraged to view the documentary “The Fruit Machine” as a learning and awareness activity for military cultural competency on the period of history known as “The LGBT Purge”. Rights to the documentary have been secured for use in future departmental training opportunities, augmented by testimonials from Purge survivors, that will be made accessible to staff and the public on the Commemoration site.
- Put consultation with underrepresented Veterans at the heart of efforts to better educate employees, maintaining ongoing engagements with women and LGBTQ2 Veteran stakeholders (including LGBT Purge survivors) and ensuring that public engagement is responsive, accessible, inclusive and culturally appropriate.
- Continued to embed GBA Plus as a central part of VAC’s culture, by socializing the GBA Plus strategy and taking into consideration the different ways policies, programs, and the service delivery model may affect men, women and gender diverse people differently.
- Continued to develop and deliver tools, training and capacity building for the broader application of GBA Plus and Gender Inclusive Services. Conducted over 15 LGBTQ2+ Cultural Competency Training sessions with 2SLGBTQ advocacy organization Egale Canada to address knowledge gaps on the differences between sex and gender, and understanding of minority gender and sexual identities.
- Since 2021, VAC Human Resources (HR) has conducted three LGBT Purge Panel sessions in partnership with Rainbow Veterans of Canada, where an online discussion with LGBT Purge Veterans centered on the lived experiences of LGBT Veterans sharing their history of the LGBT Purge. Over 700 staff have attended these sessions.
- Created a Positive Space Initiative (LGBTQ2+ and allies) employee network. They have helped support increased training through the Canada School of Public Service (CSPS) and other activities supporting increased 2SLGBTQ+ cultural competency.
- Work continues on the implementation of the recommendations from the LGBT Purge report “Emerging from the Purge”, namely to address the foundational, supporting, and reinforcing activities regarding 2SLGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion.
- Trauma-informed training is available to all VAC staff. This training provides an overview of the principles of trauma informed service, specifically in relation to those who have experienced military sexual trauma/sexual misconduct. As of July 18, 2022, more than 1,600 departmental employees have completed this course.

VAC recognizes that working in partnership with the Canada School of the Public Service, Public

Service Pride, Veteran stakeholders, internal partners Pride Networks, and key departments and agencies will foster staff understanding of the diverse lived experiences of LGBT Purge survivors. This understanding will ensure that staff have the capacity to serve all LGBTQ2+ Veterans in a culturally competent fashion.

Further, the department will develop LGBT Purge training with several levels based on the needs of staff with components of the training being mandatory for all VAC staff. The mandatory component will ensure all staff have a basic understanding of the LGBTQ2+ community and an overview of the LGBT Purge. Learners can then move to level two, which includes viewing the TVO documentary soon to be translated and posted on the VAC external site: “The Fruit Machine”. It describes the LGBT Purge in some detail, including personal accounts. Finally, the third level is attending one of the LGBT Purge Panel sessions offered periodically, as described above.

ACVA Recommendation 8

That the Department of National Defence modify the DND 1209 self-identification form to add a question asking members whether they belong to the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Government Response

Department of National Defence (DND) agrees with this recommendation.

Work is already underway to make changes to the DND 1209 Self-Identification Form to include a question asking members whether they belong to the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Since the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) came under the *Employment Equity Act* in 2002, the CAF began to conduct workforce surveys on its demographics to better monitor the progression of representation rate of identified designated groups. To do so, the CAF implemented the DND 1209 Self Identification Form to collect and store data on designated groups into the Canadian Forces Employment Equity Database.

Although not prescribed by the *Employment Equity Act*, but in keeping with the intent and spirit of the Act, the CAF is updating and modernizing the DND 1209 form and data collection to add the option of a voluntary self-identification field for 2SLGBTQ+. This work began in April 2022 and is expected to be completed by fiscal year 2023-2024. The data collected through the new field will remain confidential within the CAF and will continue to be used in the context of employment equity in policy and program development efforts. DND/CAF will make anonymized data reporting and representation public annually via the CAF Employment Equity Report.

National Defence is committed to building an inclusive and modern Defence Team that reflects Canada’s diversity, values, and culture. To that end, and to ensure that the DND 1209 form continues to be a relevant tool, DND/CAF will consider making further potential amendments to the DND 1209 form once the ongoing *Employment Equity Act* review led by Employment and Social Development Canada, which is planned to conclude in 2023.

ACVA Recommendation 9

That Veterans Affairs Canada allow 2SLGBTQ+ Veterans to self-identify through its life after service surveys and other data collection tools

Government Response

VAC agrees with this recommendation and is committed to enabling 2SLGBTQ+ Veterans to voluntarily self-identify through its life after service surveys and other data collection tools.

VAC conducts and supports research projects, monitors and interprets international research, provides methodological expertise to help guide strategic decisions, and engages in knowledge transfer and exchange with other partners and stakeholders. VAC is committed to achieving the objectives outlined in the Minister of VAC’s Mandate Letter, dated December 16, 2021, to

support disaggregated research and data to better meet the needs of underrepresented Veterans. VAC has made strides towards improving the availability, quality and understanding of data for underrepresented Veterans, such as 2SLGBTQ+, women, and Indigenous Veterans, through the inclusion of Veteran identifier questions on future surveys, for example. This will be achieved in partnership with Statistics Canada and other federal departments such as WAGE and academic research institutions.

The Life After Service Survey is being replaced in 2022 by the Canadian Veteran Health Survey, which will represent all former Canadian Armed Forces members and will collect a wider variety of data. The first cycle of this survey will launch this fall and will include questions on sex at birth, gender, and sexual orientation. The same questions have also been added to other Statistics Canada surveys where Veterans are identified, including the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability and the 2022 Indigenous Peoples Survey. The data collected through these new questions will help decision makers better understand and serve the Canadian Veteran population.

VAC is defining the purpose and necessity of collecting information on gender identity, and other Veteran characteristics, in support of the administration of VAC's programs. As with all new personal data element collections, VAC will determine if applicable Privacy Impact Assessments (PIAs) and associated Personal Information Banks (PIBs) require updating.

VAC continues to work closely with Statistics Canada to advance the understanding of the Veteran population through the development and inclusion of Veteran identifier questions on upcoming national surveys, the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability, which also asks about sex at birth, gender, and sexual orientation.

The 2020 VAC National Client Survey (VNCS) was the first time the client survey collected gender, the 2022 VNCS continues to collect gender, expanding collection to allow respondents to state "another gender" and allowing those who responded to further specify their gender in an open text box, if they choose to. The survey plans to be in line with Statistics Canada phrasing for the 2024 iteration.

ACVA Recommendation 10

That VAC create liaison officer positions responsible for regularly following up on benefit applications and overseeing the work of case managers to implement application processing plans for Veterans with more complex needs.

ACVA Recommendation 11

That Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) prioritize the use of a detailed checklist developed through consultation with Veterans - to be used at the time of intake (such as VAC's Benefits Navigator); and that VAC make a concerted effort to prioritize personal connections with Veterans, especially those who do not have a case manager and often call for service but never reach the same person twice or are redirected to a website.

Government Response to Recommendations 10 and 11

Given the priority to focus on faster decisions, the Department will address the objectives of recommendations 10 and 11, but will use a different approach that includes multiple lines of effort.

The Department is in the process of creating an Outreach Unit, made up of existing experienced disability benefits staff, to work with front line staff in the offices across the country responsible for delivering services to Veterans (including Case Managers), as well as local Veteran and member communities, to provide detailed information and support on benefits and the application process. The Outreach Unit will also develop new ways to support better communication with Veterans and members applying for disability benefits.

Departmental employees, particularly Case Managers, will work collaboratively with the new Outreach Unit. This team approach will ensure clear communication and a seamless referral

process for Veterans with more complex needs who need case management services. As Case Managers provide a specialized service, their skill set is better suited to approach and assist Veterans with multiple and complex needs. Case Managers have the ability to navigate and coordinate the required supports to achieve positive outcomes.

Additionally, VAC offers a continuum of service, which includes guided support. Clients requiring additional support beyond targeted assistance receive a personalized connection with an assigned Veteran Service Agent (VSA) as a single point of contact when receiving guided support. The VSAs are available as front line staff in the Area Offices to connect and respond to the needs of their assigned clients by supporting them in navigating VAC benefits and community supports.

The Department has made enhancements to My VAC Account's application tracking tool. These enhancements help Veterans and members understand where their application is in the process. The enhancements resulted from the findings in the [Disability Benefits Application Process Consultation](#). The application tracking tool also provides quick and convenient access to relevant information. VAC is making continual updates to the tool. The goal is to have more detailed status tracking available for all applications.

In conjunction with this, the Department is working to make the process for applying for disability benefits more intuitive, straightforward and clear for Veterans. Consultations are an important tool for improving the way VAC delivers benefits and services. Input received from Veterans and other stakeholders is invaluable and assists in making needed improvements as VAC continues to strive for service excellence. VAC's Spring 2021 consultation, completed using the 'Let's Talk Veterans' platform, is one example of using Veterans' feedback to design new and enhance current processes. While VAC intends to simplify application processes by the use of additional check boxes and examples, as well as exploring the use of 'how-to' videos on VAC's website, all such initiatives will be co-designed with Veterans, through consultation testing and feedback.

The Department is also working to improve the awareness of and access to VAC services and programs for communities in remote areas. For instance, VAC has collaborated with Service Canada to include information on VAC services in Service Canada's outreach materials for remote communities. Since April 14, 2020, information about VAC services is also available through the Service Canada Outreach Support Centre's toll-free number for Indigenous communities and vulnerable clients.

Further, VAC is engaging with Indigenous organizations to co-develop outreach processes on the priorities of Indigenous Veterans, including access to benefits. This process is most advanced with Assembly of First Nations (AFN) through the drafting of a Letter of Understanding, that includes four pillars: Outreach and engagement, commemoration, historical record of Indigenous Veterans, and clear point of contact resourcing for AFN to contact VAC. With other Indigenous organizations, VAC is in the early stages of investigating how to enable co-development and engagement.

The Department is currently conducting work focused on making the disability benefit application process more responsive. It concentrates on ways to improve the descriptions, contents and checklists associated with both the online application process through My VAC Account and the manual application process.

Early results indicate a possible re-design of application checklists so that Veterans are aware of what is required up front, a better description of the process as well as requirements and expectations, additional clarity on defining what a 'diagnosis' is and how it is obtained, and more use of drop down boxes to support the Veteran's statement of claim. These focal points are being explored in a joint and collaborative manner with Veterans, their representatives and Departmental staff.