

Feature: WTF, Minister

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Veteran Voice.info

VVi is for you, all veterans, regardless of whether you belong to a veteran organization or not. VVi is a distribution centre, a conduit for making sure that the information you need as a veteran is there for you in a timely fashion. Our aim is to provide a forum for *all* Canadian veterans, serving members and their families to have access to information pertaining to veteran rights.

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VAC Stakeholders Committee

le systeme D: on se debrouillera toujours (we'll muddle through somehow)

French General Staff doctrine 1870

Regardless of who is the minister, political party in power or expectations of the Veterans Community, VAC is in the habit of doing its own thing and completely disregarding what should be done. The department justifies this audacious practice by carefully selecting some of the many advocates and groups, which represent the Veterans Community, to “rubber stamp” its activities. One has only to consider how carefully VAC stage manages its so-called meetings with stakeholders. The agenda of the past three meetings have limited the majority of the stakeholders to five minutes for talking during the VAC chaired discussion sessions. There is no time allocated for questions following each of the VAC presentations which take up the bulk of these day-long meetings. Speakers are expected to limit their input to the narrowly defined topics approved by VAC.

The impression that these meetings give to the observer is that advocates are to be seen but not really heard.

This may seem very cynical and I define this as follows:

“believing that people are motivated purely by self-interest; distrustful of human sincerity or integrity”, or

“doubtful as to whether something will happen or whether it is worthwhile”.

If you agree with these definitions, then I am cynical.

I do not like the current format of these stakeholder meetings and have expressed myself to several VAC senior bureaucrats. In my opinion, they do not like criticism and my actions with regards to these meetings. In April 2015, I had the audacity to not only record the majority of the meeting, but I also published my own synopsis of the round table or open forum discussion. The minister, Erin O'Toole, did not like me recording the meeting and openly said so because he believed that it would discourage people from participating in the meeting.

Both recording the meeting and publishing a synopsis were motivated by the poor communications practiced by VAC. It is very, very bad at sharing information. The department has been repeatedly asked to provide information about these meetings, but refuses for reasons that VAC will not explain. VAC will not allow advocates to contribute to the creation of an agenda in addition to limiting formal vocal participation in these meetings.

If anyone is not satisfied or wants to propose changes, then they will not be invited to the meetings.

If you need proof of this, then you need look no further than my “non-attendance” at the last two meetings in December 2015 and May 2016. One exclusion might be an error of omission, but two is an error of commission (a deliberate and premeditated action).

VAC recently announced that it has formed six advisory groups (see announcement below). The reasons given for why the groups were established are “to improve transparency and support consultation to address important Veterans' issues”. If these are the actual reasons for forming these groups, then why do the members have to sign non-disclosure agreements? How is transparency improved and consultation supported if the members can not communicate with their organisations and the Veterans Community outside of the groups?

I also question the need for a group to discuss “service excellence”. If VAC has already established that it provides excellent service, then why bother talk about it, unless VAC needs the group to “rubber stamp” its current standards.

This is not the first time that VAC has formed groups to advise it on these subjects. The fate of the former groups should be considered because it may be the same for the new groups. The former groups included:

- Gerontological Advisory Council (established in 1997)
- New Veterans Charter Advisory Group
- Special Needs Advisory Group (established in 2005)

Each group provided advice and produced formal reports. Much of their work was quietly ignored by VAC. When the work was discussed by the VAC Stakeholders Committee, The attendees considered them of great value and stated this in a letter to the minister. The stakeholders included these recommendations:

“The VAC Stakeholders Committee unanimously approves the position that the Federal Government be required to fully implement the recommendations of the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group as endorsed and complemented by the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs in order to fulfill its commitment to Canada’s veterans and their dependants.

The VAC Stakeholders Committee unanimously adopts the position that VAC be required to fully implement the recommendations in the Gerontological Advisory Council Report in order to fulfill its commitment to the veterans’ community for substantial health care reform and to satisfy the “social covenant” that exists between Canadian veterans, their dependants, and the people of Canada.

The VAC Stakeholders Committee unanimously adopts the position that the recommendations of the Special Needs Advisory Group Report be incorporated into the Federal Government’s full implementation of the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group Report in order to fulfill its commitment to Canada’s seriously disabled veterans and their dependants.”

The letter was sent to the minister following the last meeting of the VAC Stakeholders Committee in February 2012. The committee was scheduled to meet again in June 2012. The minister declined to answer the letter and it was decided to

first postpone the next meeting, and then finally disband the committee. The members were not informed of these decisions, but had to get the information unofficially.

This is the same habit that was evident during the public acceptance of the New Veterans Charter in 2005 (when the Liberals were last in power). A small and select group of six advocates had to sign a confidential agreement (not to discuss the charter) and fully support the charter. Anyone who disagreed with the terms was excluded.

Operating behind closed doors with minimal public scrutiny is VAC's preferred method of operation.

This is why I am doubtful whether VAC will make any significant changes or generally do anything worthwhile. The senior bureaucrats seem motivated by purely self-interest, and do not encourage initiatives from the Veterans Community.

My critics will vehemently disagree with my character assassination of VAC. They are welcome to their own opinions. Most of them can not provide evidence of improvement in VAC's operations over the course of many years since its creation as an independent federal department. If such evidence was obvious, then old Veterans would not be fighting to gain their entitlements after decades; long after their military service was ended. Many unhappy Veterans use the same words to describe how VAC operates (**deflect, defer, delay, deny...repeat as required**) and these four words apply just as much today as they did in the 1940's. There is a fifth word die, which very cynical people will say is what VAC hopes that unhappy Veterans will do so that the department does not have to deal with them anymore.

Final comment concerning the quote at the top of this article. System D was used by the French Army prior to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. It should not be surprising to anyone that France lost the war. Muddling through rarely works.

Veterans Affairs Canada

News Release

April 15, 2016

New Initiative to Consult with Veterans Stakeholders - Advisory groups to improve transparency and engage with Veterans

OTTAWA - The Honourable Kent Hehr, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, today announced a new initiative to broaden engagement with stakeholders. Six ministerial advisory groups are being put in place as part of his commitment to improve transparency and support consultation to address important Veterans' issues.

The six advisory groups will focus on policy, service excellence, mental health, families, care and support and commemoration. Each group will be comprised of up to twelve members, and participants will appoint a chair from their membership. A senior departmental official will also be selected to co-chair each group and a representative of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman will be invited to attend the meetings as an observer. Current members' names will be updated as the advisory groups are established and their membership confirmed.

The overall goal is to engage with stakeholders, work toward common goals and seek advice and input on new and existing initiatives to support Veterans. The six advisory groups will help inform policy and program development as well as service delivery at Veterans Affairs Canada. This will ensure all areas reflect the changing needs of Veterans and their families. Records of discussion of these meetings will also be posted as they become available.

A Ministerial stakeholder summit with broader representation is planned for May 9-10, 2016, in Ottawa. The summit will provide an opportunity to collaborate, share views and gather information on topics that are

important to Veterans and their families. This is a follow-up to the December 2015 Stakeholder Summit whose record of discussion is posted online.

Quick Facts

Advisory groups provide an opportunity for early and ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and serve as a sounding board for the development of Veterans Affairs Canada's policies, programs and services.

Advisory group members are selected in consultation with stakeholder groups and based on their interests and involvement within the Veteran community. Membership of these groups is still being finalized and will be made public once confirmed.

Veterans Affairs Canada will continue to listen to all interested and engaged stakeholders regardless of their involvement in any of these groups.

Stakeholder Summits are large, in-person events to discuss stakeholder priorities. Representatives from nearly 30 stakeholder groups attended the last Stakeholder Summit on December 2, 2015.

Quotes

"Through our new initiative, I want to create a space and forum for stakeholders to give me their advice and suggestions. It is not our position to tell Veterans and their families what they need—we want to hear from them. Our new strategy, including the six advisory groups, will help us build stronger relationships with Veterans and the organizations that represent them."

The Honourable Kent Hehr, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister for National Defence

For further information:

Sarah McMaster, Press Secretary, Office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs, 613-996-4649;

Media Relations, Veterans Affairs Canada, 613-992-7468

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-us/advisory-groups>

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/e.../about-us/stakeholder-engagement>

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<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/e.../about-us/advisory-groups/policy>

Anciens Combattants Canada

Communiqué

Le 15 avril 2016

Une nouvelle initiative de consultation avec les intervenants de la communauté des vétérans - Des groupes consultatifs veilleront à améliorer la transparence et à mobiliser les vétérans

OTTAWA - L'honorable Kent Hehr, ministre des Anciens Combattants et ministre associé de la Défense nationale, a annoncé aujourd'hui une nouvelle initiative en vue d'accroître la mobilisation des intervenants. Six groupes consultatifs ministériels sont sur le point d'être mis en place dans le cadre de son engagement pour améliorer la transparence et appuyer le processus de consultation selon lequel d'importantes questions relatives aux vétérans seront étudiées.

Les six groupes consultatifs concentreront leurs efforts sur les politiques, l'excellence du service, la santé mentale, les familles, les soins, le soutien et la commémoration. Chaque groupe sera composé d'au moins douze membres, et les participants nommeront un président parmi eux. Un cadre supérieur du Ministère sera désigné à la coprésidence de chaque groupe et un représentant du Bureau de l'ombudsman des vétérans sera invité à participer aux réunions à titre d'observateur. On peut voir les noms des membres actuels en ligne et ceux-ci seront mis à jour lorsque les groupes consultatifs auront été établis et que les membres auront été confirmés.

L'objectif global consiste à mobiliser les intervenants, à travailler vers l'atteinte de buts communs et à obtenir des conseils et des avis sur des initiatives actuelles et nouvelles destinées à soutenir les vétérans. Les six groupes consultatifs veilleront à guider le processus d'élaboration de politiques et de programmes, ainsi que la prestation de services à Anciens Combattants Canada. Cette initiative fera en sorte que tous les secteurs tiennent compte des besoins changeants des vétérans et de leurs familles. Des comptes rendus des discussions lors de ces rencontres seront publiés une fois qu'ils seront disponibles.

Un sommet des intervenants du Ministère avec une plus grande représentation est prévu les 9 et 10 mai 2016, à Ottawa. Ce sommet donnera aux participants l'occasion de se concerter, de partager des points de vue et de recueillir de l'information sur des sujets d'importance aux vétérans et à leurs familles. Ce sommet des intervenants donne suite à celui qui a eu lieu en décembre 2015 et dont le compte rendu des discussions a été publié en direct.

Les faits en bref

Les groupes consultatifs offrent une occasion de tenir un dialogue précoce et continu avec les intervenants et de leur permettre d'offrir une rétroaction aux fins de l'élaboration de politiques, de programmes et de services à Anciens Combattants Canada.

La sélection des membres des groupes consultatifs se fait en consultation avec des groupes d'intervenants et en fonction de leurs champs d'intérêt et de leur participation au sein de la communauté des vétérans. Le processus de nomination à ces groupes est sur le point de se terminer, et les noms des membres seront rendus publics une fois qu'ils auront été confirmés.

Anciens Combattants Canada continuera d'être à l'écoute de tous les intervenants intéressés et mobilisés, peu importe leur degré de mobilisation au sein de l'un ou l'autre de ces groupes.

Les sommets d'intervenants sont des événements à grand déploiement de personnes qui se penchent ensemble sur les priorités des intervenants. Des représentants de près de 30 groupes d'intervenants ont pris part au dernier sommet des intervenants qui s'est tenu le 2 décembre 2015.

Citations

« Grâce à notre nouvelle initiative, je veux créer un forum qui permettra aux intervenants de me faire part de leurs avis et suggestions. Il ne nous revient pas de dire aux vétérans et à leurs familles ce dont ils ont besoin — nous voulons les entendre à ce sujet. Notre nouvelle stratégie, y compris les six groupes consultatifs, nous aidera à resserrer nos liens avec les vétérans et les organisations qui les représentent. »

L'honorable Kent Hehr, ministre des Anciens Combattants et ministre associé de la Défense nationale

Renseignements :

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Relations avec les médias, Anciens Combattants Canada, 613-992-7468

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WTF, Minister

“Nous marchons à un désastre - We are walking into a disaster.”

The aim of this article is to outline my disappointment with the initial actions of the new minister, Kent Hehr. During the federal election, the Liberal Party provided many examples of how it was going to be different from the Conservative Party if it formed the next government. Voters responded favourably and it is no surprise that those who supported the Liberal will have great expectations.

In my opinion, it did not take long for Kent Hehr to demonstrate that such expectations may never be realised. Instead there are indications that it will be the more of the same, or in terms understood by Veterans; same shit, different day.

Yes, the minister has addressed the media to provide insight into his plans; however, there are some significant differences between some of his comments and some of his actions. One good example of this disconnect is his performance at his first summit with Veterans groups on 2 December at the War Museum in Ottawa. He praised the personnel of VAC...WTF, minister! Many of the major problems have developed because of the people whom he now believes are doing a good job. It is illogical to believe that people are doing good work, if they are not solving the problems.

It is common sense that if you are not providing solutions that you are part of the problem.

Having attended past summits, I know that the attendees keep discussing the same things, but solutions still seem to be in short supply. For example, homeless Veterans have been the topic of many conversations among Veterans groups for years. The common solution offered by VAC is to give money to various organisations, but money can only solve some of this problem. There is another aspect of this problem which VAC has not addressed and that is its long history of divesting itself of institutions where Veterans can get help. The last health care facility, St Anne' Hospital, will become a Quebec provincial hospital soon. Once VAC relinquishes control all Veterans will have to rely upon provincial facilities.

Yet homeless Canadians are a national problem. Therefore a national solution is required. Even if such a solution becomes reality, there will still be Canadians, both Veterans and non-Veterans, who will choose to remain homeless and spurn help.

The best that can be expected is that the numbers will be decreased significantly and that VAC and other agencies can monitor all those who remain homeless.

VAC has to provide the leadership and oversight to effectively deal with this issue. This means coordinating the operations of all organisations involved. The department can not simply provide money and expect things to improve.

The minister has announced that Veterans will have the choice between pensions and lump sums, but this will make the problem worse not better. WTF, minister.

For example, why is he willing to perpetuate discrimination? The CF had to accept the changes in 2005, but the RCMP rejected the NVC. So there are still too many different Veteran categories, which VAC must manage.

Here is a short list of potential problems with maintaining this mixed system:

1. How will the financial plans be calculated? Will the numbers be based on the old charter or the new charter? There is a significant difference between the total payments and the rationale for granting benefits to Veterans. The Pension Act provides a disability benefit which is not a true pension and is based on the severity of

disabilities, while the NVC lump sum can be supplemented by monthly payments. Who will determine what is fair and equitable?

2. When these new policies are introduced, will Veterans be able to change to the new plans and how retroactive will they be? Again if VAC does not allow all Veterans to revise their benefits, the department will perpetuate discrimination.
3. Any revisions must be properly managed by VAC, which is currently undermanned and overwhelmed. Introducing new policies will create more "red tape". VAC personnel often can not explain how any benefits are granted and it is frustrating for Veterans who must grapple with conflicting advice.
4. There are too many words used in conjunction with financial benefits. It is confusing because there is a mix of taxable and non-taxable benefits and income. VAC is often accused of being ambiguous in how it determines who gets what and why. Again too many questions and not enough answers.

The logical solution is not to keep adding more layers to the onion that is Veterans legislation. VAC needs to simplify its policies, doctrine and operations.

The minister should be reviewing the old and new charters and asking himself why it is necessary to have two charters. He could also consider why there have been almost 500 recommendations presented since 2005 to amend the new charter.

Again the normal practice is to replace not supplement something old. When "New Coke" was introduced in 1985, there were many complaints. A steep drop in sales resulted in a return to the original soft drink albeit rebranded as "Coke Classic".

As long as there are two Veterans charters there will always be comparisons and problems. In my opinion, there is a need for a newer charter to blend the best of the existing charters, which will be fair and equitable to all Veterans. This must be acceptable to both the CF and the RCMP. And truly involve all Veterans in its development (unlike the secrecy surrounding the NVC).

On subject of hiring new personnel for VAC, the minister commented the past:

- Hehr instead blamed deep cuts to staff under the Conservatives for many of the problems. The Conservatives' cut of about 900 positions at Veterans Affairs represented about 23 per cent of its workforce.
- "*The public service has been inundated with doing difficult work on stringent timelines without the manpower to do so.*"
- Hehr said the government has hired about 150 of a planned 400 new employees to make up for the cuts at Veterans Affairs, though he wouldn't say if the government would replace all 900 who were laid off. (Ottawa Citizen 20 January)

WTF, minister. You can not blame the staff cuts for creating problems and then not make hiring more staff part of the solution. Either the problems were not caused by the cuts or they were. Being indecisive is not a good indicator of the type of leadership that you will provide. May be Charlie Brown could be wishy-washy, but he was a cartoon character not a federal minister managing a multi-billion dollar organisation affecting over 700,000 Veterans and many more hundreds of thousands of their family members.

One of the sad realities of politics is the approach taken by many politicians to deal with any situation. Either money is thrown at problems or the problem is discussed at length as if just talking about it will miraculously result in a solution.

Unfortunately, one of the possible forums for discussing possible solutions is not effective in identifying solutions. This is the summit mentioned above. Too often it is more about telling Veterans what VAC is doing or not doing rather than engaging all attendees in solving the problems.

Both summits in 2015 were very carefully managed by VAC. The serving minister spoke, then the deputy minister coordinated a series of formal VAC lectures and then the attendees were divided into two groups in which each group had a very limited time to speak. Many attendees were not allowed to speak because they were observers.

WTF, minister. Why spend money to invite people to a meeting and then not allow them to speak or limit their time to a ridiculously short time (under five minutes).

There should be time allotted after each speech for questions. Better that some things on the agenda are cancelled than limiting discussion on topics. Also allow groups to have greater representation as long as additional people have their expenses covered by their group. There is a lot of complicated information and it is a challenge for an individual to process everything.

If some of the agenda items have to be delayed to the next meeting, then so be it. This will give more time for the organisations to research and prepare.

Speaking of agendas, WTF, minister. Why are Veterans not allowed to contribute to the agenda and be numbered among the presentations?

The current format of the summit gives the impression that Veterans are to be seen but not heard. This is an indication of a lack of respect for the most important people attending these meetings. Any meeting should be a forum for client centred discussion, if VAC truly wants to be seen as caring and compassionate (words used by the previous minister during the April 2015 summit). The minister can spend more time listening to Veterans rather than VAC "preaching" about programs and policy.

On a personal note, I was disappointed that my organisation was not invited to the December summit. We always have something to say and we are motivated to share information. I guess that VAC officials were not impressed by my oral summation of afternoon round table (despite many compliments) or the fact that I like to record meetings so that I can review information later (I was told that it discouraged people from talking). Given how little VAC provides in the way of a summary of these summits, it falls to the attendees to determine what was or was not important and worth sharing with their members.

My impression is that VAC prefers that any meeting be a closed event and only a very limited amount of information be published. And anyone who does not like this philosophy will be shunned.

WTF, minister. Canadian voters were repeatedly told by the Liberal Party that there would be more accountability, more transparency, and more openness. Will there be less need to submit "access to information" requests and legal action or not?

Much has been said about the Conservative Party's trend of lapsed spending with the nice round figure of \$1 billion being highlighted. Let Canadians forget, the Liberal Party also practiced this policy:

- 2004-2005 \$111,711,924.00 (3.98% of annual budget)
- 2005-2006 \$20,816,586.00 (0.72%)

In addition, it was a Liberal government that authorised the development of the new charter and restricted access to the benefits of the old charter.

The minister has got to do a better job to show that his government is an improvement over previous governments. This is not the time to be relying upon the excuse that he needs time to familiarise himself with the problems as all of his senior advisers have been in place for years. Older Veterans do not have the luxury of time in which to have their grievances addressed nor do younger Veterans want to face delays in receiving their benefits. Canadians do not tolerate procrastination on the part of the CF or the RCMP, but rather expect both organisations to perform their duties when and as needed.

Minister, the most important thing to know is that your "clients" are expected to solve problems quickly and efficiently. It is very disrespectful to act otherwise. Blaming the past only works for a limited time.

Ultimately every minister has to lead or get out of the way. Pick your option and be decisive. The countdown has already begun.

Perry Gray is a Regular Force veteran, serving as the Chief Editor of VVi. Perry has been with VVi for 13 years.



You Can Help!

All veterans are encouraged to pass information, opinions, links to self-help sites onto VVi. VeteranVoice.info is a distribution centre and we are dependant on others to pass information. This is your site. Tell other veterans about your site.

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PPCLI Association
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<http://vpp.ppcliassoc.ca>



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Clawback

<http://leavenovetbehind.ca/home>



<http://seanbruyea.com>



<https://www.cfpsa.com/Splashpages/SoldierOn/>



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Anciens Combattants Canada

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/>

V.E.T.S
Veterans Emergency
Transition Services

<http://www.vetscanada.org/>



Veterans Ombudsman
Ombudsman des vétérans

<http://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/>



Veterans of Canada.ca
A Community for Canadian Heroes

<http://veteransofcanada.ca/>



Wounded Warriors Fund

<http://www.woundedwarriors.ca/>



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