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Feature: **Operational Progress or Just Stagnation**

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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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Operational Progress or Just Stagnation

By Perry Gray, Chief Editor VVi

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“The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it.” General Norman Schwarzkopf

Now that the new Minister of Veterans Affairs, Seamus O'Reagan, has been in the position for one month, it is appropriate to review what his department has achieved after 700 plus days since the last election.

The previous minister seemed to have lots of energy and was adamant that he would fulfil all of the goals outlined in his mandate letter. He shared his optimism for more than a year and then seemed to either lose interest or just lack the ability to implement changes. He repeatedly told Canadians that the goals would be achieved, but was reluctant to say when. By his last few months, he seemed more interested in preparing for his re-election campaign than doing his ministerial job.

To recap, here is what Kent Hehr was instructed to do for the Veterans Community:

1. Work with the Minister of National Defence to reduce complexity, overhaul service delivery, and strengthen partnerships between Veterans Affairs and National Defence.
2. Re-establish lifelong pensions as an option for our injured veterans, and increase the value of the disability award, while ensuring that every injured veteran has access to financial advice and support so that they can determine the form of compensation that works best for them and their families.
3. Expand access to the Permanent Impairment Allowance to better support veterans who have had their career options limited by a service-related illness or injury.
4. Provide injured veterans with 90 percent of their pre-release salary, and index this benefit so that it keeps pace with inflation.
5. Create a new Veterans Education Benefit that will provide full support for the costs of up to four years of college, university, or technical education for Canadian Forces veterans after completion of service.
6. Improve career and vocational assistance for veterans through ensuring that job opportunities for returning veterans are included in Community Benefits Agreements for new federally-funded infrastructure projects.
7. Deliver a higher standard of service and care, and ensure that a "one veteran, one standard" approach is upheld.
8. Re-open the nine Veterans Affairs service offices recently closed, hire more service delivery staff, and fully implement all of the Auditor General's recommendations on enhancing mental health service delivery to veterans.
9. Create two new centres of excellence in veterans' care, including one with a specialization in mental health, post-traumatic stress disorder and related issues for both veterans and first responders.

10. Provide greater education, counselling, and training for families who are providing care and support to veterans living with physical and/or mental health issues as a result of their service.

11. End the time limit for surviving spouses to apply for vocational rehabilitation and assistance services.

12. Increase the veteran survivor's pension amount from 50 percent to 70 percent.

13. Eliminate the "marriage after 60" clawback clause, so that surviving spouses of veterans receive appropriate pension and health benefits.

14. Double funding to the Last Post Fund to ensure that all veterans receive a dignified burial.

15. Work with the Minister of National Defence to develop a suicide prevention strategy for Canadian Armed Forces personnel and veterans.

The website, <https://trudeaumetre.polimeter.org>, tracks the progress of the Liberal Party's commitments including those made to the Veterans Community:

1. Double funding to the Last Post Fund.

2. Increase the value of the NVC disability award (\$360,000).

3. Invest \$40 million each year to provide injured veterans with 90% of their pre-release salary with inflation indexation (Earnings Loss Benefit).

4. *Re-open the nine Veterans Affairs service offices.*

5. Cover the cost of four years of post-secondary education for every veteran who wants one.

6. Eliminate the marriage after 60 clause.

7. End the time limit for surviving spouses to apply for vocational rehabilitation and assistance services.

8. *Hire 400 new service delivery staff.*

9. Include provisions for the employment of veterans in the Community Benefits Agreements of federal infrastructure projects.

10. Increase the veteran survivor's pension amount from 50% to 70%.

11. Invest \$100 million each year to expand the circle of support for veterans' families.
12. Invest \$25 million each year to expand access to the Permanent Impairment Allowance (now the Career Impact Allowance).
13. Re-establish lifelong pensions as an option for injured veterans.
14. Invest \$80 million every year to create a new Veterans Education Benefit.
15. Spend \$20 million to create two new centres of excellence in veterans' care.

According to the website, the first four have been achieved; however, there is less evidence to indicate that the Veterans Community has actually benefited from these successes. For example, very few receive the \$360,000 lump sum as the average is about \$40,000.

The remaining 11 commitments are either stalled or are rated as broken.

This is not a very good ratio of success to failure. It means that the new minister has to do a lot before the 2019 election to complete the list. Given the slow progress to date, is he likely to achieve complete success?

Several goals from the mandate letter are not monitored by the website including working with DND to improve the working relationship between both departments, and develop a suicide prevention strategy. Reportedly, VAC and the DND will release their joint suicide prevention strategy soon (fall 2017). It is unclear what progress has been made in improving their overall working relationship.

Fun facts, VAC staffing levels fell from 2,873 prior to the 2015 election to 2,272 by 2017. Only 115 Veterans are employed by VAC, and only 18 were included in the new hires as of March 2017. So VAC has not increased its employees and has not provided leadership in hiring Veterans.

The new minister has announced yet another plan to improve priority hiring of Veterans. The new initiative will help Veterans adapt to civilian employment and employment in the federal public service. It is unclear how this latest attempt will be better than older efforts.

Some of the outstanding goals seem like “no brainers” like ending the after 60 years clawback and ending the time limit on spousal applications for vocational rehabilitation and assistance services. What is so complicated that these have stalled?

Missing from both lists are important reforms to both the older Veterans Charter (pre-2005) and the New Veterans Charter (post-2005). It seems that VAC is unwilling to consider anything beyond the current 15 point mandate. This is evident from the agendas of the most recent VAC Stakeholders Summits. Despite a very critical presentation by two Veterans, Mark Campbell and Bruce Henwood, who compared the Pension Act and the NVC in terms of financial benefits.

The disparity between old and new benefits remains the “elephant in the room”.

The last Liberal government claimed that the NVC would be “living legislation”, but no action has been taken to implement the hundreds of recommendations to ensure that the NVC is still living.

The Conservative government did make some changes, but nowhere near the amount necessary to redress the many flaws in the NVC.

Kent Hehr did form new advisory groups to provide guidance and feedback on some important issues. The six groups formed in April 2016 were:

λ *Policy*

λ *Service Excellence*

λ *Mental Health*

λ *Families*

λ *Care and Support*

λ *Commemoration*

VAC has information on each group on its website. Here are some samples from the most recent meetings:

Policy - The co-chairs and members indicated they were encouraged by the comments from the Minister’s Office but questioned the purpose and utility of the PAG. Members were particularly dissatisfied that their Chapter One recommendations, presented at the October 2016 Stakeholder Summit, were not all reflected in the Budget and hoped that this meeting would provide them with the status of these recommendations. Members also highlighted that information on issues of interest to Veterans is not reaching the community and that strategic communications need to be a priority. The co-chairs finally stressed that at the end of the meeting, members need to feel confident that this advisory group is moving in the right direction, in a trusting environment, and that a two-way dialogue exists with VAC.

Service Excellence - Highlights: Disability applications submitted through regular mail system and/or My VAC Account are sent to the appropriate Disability Benefit Unit.

The Department does not have a list of trades that are generally associated with certain disabilities.

Six stream-lined decision-making models were introduced in 2015 to improve processing times for disability benefit decisions. These models recognize the inherent risk involved in some specific trades within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and allow non-nurse adjudicators to render decisions involving straightforward cases where less evidence is needed to determine the relationship between the condition/disability and service,

provided there is no contradictory evidence. These include some musculoskeletal conditions, cumulative joint trauma (these deal with osteoarthritis claims of weight bearing joints), hearing loss, tinnitus, post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric disorders (Generalized Anxiety, Major Depression and Adjustment Disorder) as a result of Special Duty Service or high-risk peacetime trade.

VAC considers the CAF Military Occupational Classification Task Statements, which outline the physical aspects of a trade, when rendering a disability benefit decision. Information regarding trades and task statements that no longer exist with the CAF can be accessed via the CAF Liaison Office to VAC.

Disability applications related to illness are usually more complex and require additional review before a decision is rendered.

An applicant's statement regarding why a disability or illness is related to service is a very important piece of evidence considered.

VAC's service standard target is to render 80% of disability benefit decisions within 16 weeks. Current average service standard is 17.5 weeks, including consultation with a VAC Medical Advisor, if requested.

Proposals/Observations:

Consider removal of the compensation principle and move to 24/7 coverage for all CAF members.

Consider removal of partial entitlement in disability benefit adjudication (removal of fifth's)

Move disability adjudication model to a Canada Revenue Agency model - grant benefits quickly and then evaluate applications after to determine who should/should not have been approved.

Provide a link to the applicable legislation and/or chapter in the Table of Disabilities in the decision letter so the individual knows exactly what was considered when the decision was made.

Program statistics provided by the Department can be very misleading. As of March 31, 2016, it is recorded that 84% of the first application decisions rendered were favourable, however, the claim may only be partially approved.

Mental Health - Members discussed priorities for the Group's work moving forward and agreed that suicide prevention will be the major focus. Also considered priorities are marijuana for medical purposes, Mefloquine and service dogs.

The Group also expressed interest in assessing the effectiveness of programs and treatments related to mental health conditions. It was agreed that the Advisory Group itself

could not undertake this work but that presentations at meetings about the state of research on issues the group will address, such as marijuana for medical purposes, would be beneficial. It was noted that the Canadian Armed Forces evaluates programs through a treatment standardization committee, a formal process that looks at an established set of criteria. The CAF is also looking at programs that might help treatment but that are not scientifically based.

The group discussed a more open-minded approach to assessing program effectiveness, noting the distinction between evidenced-based assessments and anecdotal evidence. They felt that sticking strictly to science was limiting and noted that “practice-based evidence” can help support programs that have consistently demonstrated factors that net promising results but which would not meet rigorous medical evaluation criteria.

The amount of information on the VAC website varies from group to group. This is also reflected in the meetings of each group with majority having had no meetings in 2017.

VAC has had a chequered relationship with advisory groups. Prior to 2016, VAC disbanded all of its groups and largely ignored their advice. The practice of ignoring advice is apparent from the comments of the people, who were members of older groups, and the fact that the new groups are still discussing the same issues!

What is the point of having these groups, given the resources expended in their operations, if their input is not valued? Even if some of the people are not paid to participate, there are still the salaries (many attendees are VAC or government employees), travel expenses and other costs that VAC covers. This is money that is not available to fund the many financial benefits provided to the Veterans Community.

A cynic may consider this the same as burning the money.

The federal government can not afford to squander its funds because it has too much debt (combined federal and provincial debts are more than \$1.3 trillion). It is in the best interests of ALL Canadians to reduce the annual increase, but this is unlikely given the forecasts of many respected economists. The federal increase could be more than \$20 billion by the end of 2017, which is double the amount that the Liberal government expected.

This may have a significant impact on how much money will be provided to the Veterans Community. While the Liberal government has repeatedly stated that it will spend billions, much of this money may be deferred to budgets after the 2019 election.

There is a significant impact on the Veterans Community now. VAC continues the malicious practices of “lowballing” disabilities and withholding services.

My cynical friend would say the more things change, the more they stay the same or plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Or to put it more bluntly, same shit, different day.

Perry Gray is a Regular Force veteran, serving as the Chief Editor of VVi. Perry has been with VVi for 16 years.

See Periodical No

201784...http://veteranvoice.info/archive/Periodicals/Periodical_17_5Sep.htm



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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Veteran's Aide Memoire

http://veteranvoice.info/archive/aide_memoire/Vet_Aide_Memoire.pdf



Marijuana For Trauma Inc.
VETERANS HELPING VETERANS
MARIJUANA For Trauma (MFT)

<https://mftgroup.ca/>

National (US) Gulf War Resources Center, Inc.

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



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<http://vpp.ppcliassoc.ca>



<http://seanbruyea.com>



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



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