

Minister  
of Veterans Affairs



Ministre  
des Anciens Combattants

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0P4

JAN 30 2015

Mr. Greg Kerr, M.P.  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs  
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0A6

Dear Colleague:

I am very pleased to provide you with an update on the progress we have made toward implementing the recommendations contained in the third report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, *The New Veterans Charter: Moving Forward*. As noted in the Government Response, these recommendations are being addressed through a two-phased approach. The first stage addresses those recommendations that can be responded to within the existing authorities and budgets of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and the Department of National Defence (DND). I am pleased to provide you with this report that outlines the progress that has already been made by the Government.

#### Stage 1 Commitments – Immediate Actions

1. Ensuring that Canadian Armed Forces members are not released from the military until they are in a stable medical condition (ACVA Recommendation #1)

Ensuring that Canadian Armed Forces members are not released from the military until they are in a stable medical condition has been a key priority for DND over the past number of years and we are pleased to report that this is now well entrenched within military release processes.

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On February 2, 2012, DND released a framework entitled *Caring for Our Own*. This framework guides the care and support of ill and injured Canadian Armed Forces members from the onset of their injury or illness through their recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration into military service, or alternatively, their return to civilian life. In the 2013-2014 fiscal year, 4,883 men and women released from the forces and, of these, 1,258 (26%) were medically released. These men and women have had the benefit of the intensive intervention and monitoring engendered in the *Caring for Our Own* approach.

2. Ensuring contact between medically releasing members and VAC at the outset of the release process and Case Management (ACVA Recommendations #1 and #11)

VAC has also enhanced transition services. VAC has improved its counselling and support to medically releasing members by ensuring they have contact with VAC staff at the onset of the release process. Further, releasing members will receive additional services from the Department, including assistance with completing applications for VAC benefits, as well as assistance to register for *My VAC Account* to enable better communication with the Department. Releasing members will also receive a copy of *My VAC Book*, a personalized document that matches their needs and personal situation to the suite of benefits and services offered by the Department.

In addition to the improvements that have been made to transition services, VAC is also engaging in a comprehensive staff development program in support of case management. To further support a seamless transition to civilian life, VAC is also undertaking other measures to allow decisions regarding a Veteran's eligibility for NVC benefits to be made prior to their release from the Canadian Armed Forces.

3. Ensuring that rehabilitation professionals are available to help members of the Canadian Armed Forces upon medical release (ACVA Recommendation #1)

VAC is also making sure that rehabilitation professionals are in place for our Veterans as they enter civilian life. Through its third party health services contractor, VAC is ensuring that key rehabilitation professionals, including physiotherapists and occupational therapists, are there to assist our Veterans. Together, VAC and DND are also exploring opportunities to ensure that Veterans have better access to family physicians. VAC has also recently entered into a contract with Canadian Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Services to ensure Veterans have continued access to skilled vocational specialists to help with their transition to civilian employment.

4. Amend the *Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act* to include a construction clause in line with that in the *Pension Act* (ACVA Recommendation #2)

It is important that Veterans and their families feel confident that their Government is there for them. Accordingly, as committed in our Government Response, legislation will be brought forward to add a new section to the *Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act* that will mirror a section currently in the *Pension Act*. The new section will clearly state the value that our Government places on military service and how, in return, the Government will support those who served Canada.

5. Extend psychological counselling to the families of Veterans (ACVA Recommendation #7)

On December 1, 2014, VAC increased the number of psychological counselling sessions available to family members of Veterans through the VAC Assistance Service. Now, families who need this support have access to up to 20 counselling sessions to respond to their individual needs.

6. Develop a new on-line training module for Veterans' caregivers (ACVA Recommendation #7)

The Government recognizes the key role families play in supporting the well-being of our men and women in uniform and our Veterans and so, in the Government Response, we committed to improve caregiver supports. I am pleased to report that a web-based caregiver training and support module is scheduled for on-line release in May 2015. This module is being designed to provide much needed assistance and support to caregivers of Veterans struggling with Operational Stress Injuries.

7. One comprehensive monthly payment (ACVA Recommendation #13)

As part of our Red Tape Reduction initiative our Government is always looking for ways to simplify program administration. By the end of summer 2015, Veterans and their families who receive recurring payments from multiple VAC programs will begin receiving one comprehensive payment. Additionally, Veterans and their families will be able to access an itemized breakdown of this payment online at their convenience.

Stage 2 Commitments – Comprehensive Recommendations

Now I would like to comment on how the Government is addressing the more complex recommendations made in *The New Veterans Charter: Moving Forward*. As noted in our Government Response, VAC and DND have committed to conduct further interdepartmental work, budgetary analysis, coordination with a wide range of federal departments, and consultation with stakeholders to consider how best to address them.

Although this work is ongoing, I am pleased to report that tangible progress has already been achieved:

1. Expanded Access to Military Family Resource Centres (ACVA Recommendation #6)

Veterans and their families who medically release from the military often face unique challenges when they transition to civilian life. That is why our Government is implementing a pilot project to provide access to the Military Family Services Program for two years post-release.

The pilot will provide access to national on-line and telephone support services and to Military Family Resource Centres in seven key sites across Canada (Victoria, Valcartier, Edmonton, Trenton, Shilo, Halifax and North Bay) that offer practical programs such as parenting support and training in resume writing. This combination of supports will help strengthen transition support for medically-releasing Canadian Armed Forces members and families.

2. Research on Veteran Health (ACVA Recommendation #11)

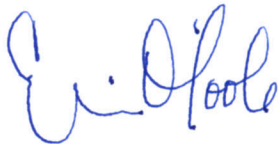
Over the past five years, there has been a concerted effort both in VAC and DND to better understand the health of serving members and Veterans. This work is continuing. In November, our Government announced new funding to support further research on Veteran health in the areas of treatment for mental health conditions, transition to civilian life, suicide and suicide prevention.

I look forward to the appearing before the Standing Committee in the near future. In the meantime, there is one question that has arisen through our analysis of the Committee's recommendations that I would respectfully ask you to consider, as follows:

Recommendation #13: The Committee recommended that the Government moves to a single monthly payment system for the monthly benefits available under the New Veterans Charter. Could the Committee indicate its rationale for a monthly benefit versus a bi-weekly schedule?

In closing, while the Government has made significant progress in our efforts to address your recommendations, we know there is still work to do. I will provide a final report on the remainder of the Committee's recommendations following Budget 2015. On behalf of serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces, Canadian Veterans and their families, we would like to thank you and the members of the House Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for your continued work and dedication to the well-being of military personnel, Veterans and their families.

Sincerely,



The Honourable Erin O'Toole, PC, CD, MP

c.c.: Jean-François Pagé  
Clerk, Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs