

**Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs' 11<sup>th</sup> Report  
*Indigenous Veterans: From Memories of Injustice to Lasting Recognition***

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

The Committee undertook a comprehensive study on Indigenous Veterans, focusing on the needs and issues specific to this group. The final report represents an important contribution to the Government of Canada's unwavering commitments to improving the well-being of all Veterans and to renewed relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples have a long and proud tradition of military service in Canada. The testimony of witnesses during the study, as well as the report's recommendations, have been central to better understanding and addressing past injustices and to addressing the needs of Indigenous Veterans.

The Government is committed to continuing its efforts to ensure that all Veterans, including Indigenous Veterans, have access to timely and high-quality services, and that they are commemorated for their notable contributions to Canada's military efforts. The Government agrees with the spirit and intent of the report and will continue to undertake initiatives to improve the experience of Indigenous Veterans.

**Committee Recommendation 1** - That Veterans Affairs Canada commit to continuing to hire Indigenous staff, with the intention of reaching a number that is at least proportional to the number of Indigenous Veterans who are served by the Department.

**Government Response** - The Government agrees that hiring Indigenous staff capitalizes on the diversity of experience and ideas that Indigenous people bring to the public service, which is consistent with the findings of the report *Many Voices One Mind: A Pathway to Reconciliation (2017)*, one of which is to encourage and support Indigenous peoples to join the federal public service. Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to having Indigenous representation in its workforce, and the Department follows guidelines and standards set out in the *Employment Equity Act*.

As of February 24, 2019, 4.1 percent of Veterans Affairs Canada's employees are Indigenous. Based on workforce data, Veterans Affairs Canada is meeting overall representation for all four designated groups (women, Aboriginal peoples\*, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities) at the departmental level as of December 31, 2018, and will continue to achieve a representative workforce. To maintain a representative workforce, in fall 2018 Veterans Affairs Canada launched a selection process targeting the recruitment of Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and visible minorities in order to have a qualified staffing pool of persons who have self-identified.

Determining the number of Indigenous Veterans the Department is a pre-requisite to setting and achieving a goal of Indigenous staff being at least proportional to the number of Indigenous Veterans served by the Department. Veterans Affairs Canada currently does not request its clients to self-identify as Indigenous as this factor does not have any bearing on eligibility for benefits and services. While there are data limitations with regard to the precise number of Indigenous Veterans the Department serves, one survey indicated that Aboriginal status (i.e. First Nations, Inuit or Métis) was self-identified by 1.5 percent of Veterans who received services between 1914 and 2003 (VanTil LD, McLean MB, Sweet J, McKinnon K. *Understanding future needs of Canadian Veterans*. Health Rep, 2018).

Moving forward, Veterans Affairs Canada will explore options to improve opportunities for self-identification on its application forms to ensure adequate representation of Indigenous peoples in the Department. Veterans Affairs Canada will also prepare for what is expected to be a larger number of Indigenous Veterans as the Canadian Armed Forces seeks to increase the representation of Indigenous peoples within the Canadian Armed Forces to 3.5 percent—the proportion of Indigenous peoples in the Canadian population.

The Department will also look at ways to compile more complete data, through client surveys for example, to better reflect the proportion of Veterans who are Indigenous. The Department will utilize a collaborative and ethical approach for data collection, sharing and stewardship between Indigenous partners and Canada. Veterans Affairs Canada has been working closely with Statistics Canada to include a Veteran identifier in the 2021 census. This proposed new Veteran identifier, combined with enhanced data on Indigenous peoples, would provide rich socio-economic data to better understand the Indigenous Veteran population.

*\*Note: In the context of the Employment Equity Act, "Aboriginal" is the legal terminology referred to in the Act.*

**Committee Recommendation 2** - That the Canadian Armed Forces delegate to each Canadian Ranger Patrol Group sufficient financial authority to ensure that the group can quickly reimburse Canadian Rangers for personal equipment that is broken while they are using it on duty.

**Government Response** - The Government of Canada is continuing efforts to ensure that the Canadian Ranger Patrol Group can reimburse Canadian Rangers.

The Canadian Rangers are a part of the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve Force working in remote, isolated and coastal regions of Canada. They provide lightly equipped, self-sufficient mobile forces to support Canadian Armed Forces' national security and public safety operations within Canada. The Canadian Rangers are a critical part of the Canadian Armed Forces, and the Forces are committed to ensuring that the Canadian Rangers receive the assistance, services and care that they need and deserve. Canada's Defence Policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, commits to enhancing and expanding the training and effectiveness of the Canadian Rangers to improve their functional capabilities within the Canadian Armed Forces. This includes ensuring that the Canadian Rangers have the equipment they need to do their jobs and are compensated fairly and as expeditiously as possible.

The Canadian Armed Forces recognizes that improvements must be made to the processing of claims for compensation for damage to personal equipment used on duty by Canadian Rangers and to ensure that compensation is provided in a timely manner. The authority to approve the requested reimbursements rests with the Chief of the Defence Staff and has already been delegated to the Director of Compensation and Benefits Administration within Military Personnel Command. The Canadian Armed Forces is looking at means to further expedite the processing of these claims, including the possibility of delegating the authority to approve the requested reimbursements to the Canadian Rangers Patrol Group level. The Canadian Armed Forces' objective is to significantly reduce the time span from the initiation of a claim to a receipt of compensation by a member.

**Committee Recommendation 3** - That Veterans Affairs Canada produce a pamphlet outlining its main programs and services in the most common Indigenous languages and that this pamphlet be distributed to all Canadian Ranger patrols.

**Government Response** - Aligned with the introduction of federal legislation *An Act respecting Indigenous languages* (Bill C-91), the Government of Canada is fully committed to the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages and culture. Indigenous languages are fundamental to the identities, cultures, spirituality, relationships to the land, world views and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to doing its part to ensure a broad understanding of its program and service offerings in the most commonly used Indigenous languages. In the interest of sharing information on programs with Indigenous communities, Veterans Affairs Canada has translated promotional materials into Indigenous languages, including Inuktitut and Dene. These products are either distributed in advance of Veterans Affairs Canada visits to community partners in the Territories or used for outreach activities.

Since 2016, Veterans Affairs Canada is conducting regular visits to northern communities (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut). As part of these visits, members of the service teams meet and provide in-person services to Veterans and their families. These visits also represent unique opportunities for Veterans Affairs Canada to build and develop its network and work with community partners and service providers to raise awareness on programs and services. Veterans Affairs Canada's promotion of visits is also delivered in Indigenous languages and to date, hundreds of Veterans have received service during these visits, including more than 90 case-managed Veterans.

With many new programs and program enhancements introduced to Veterans Affairs Canada's suite of benefits since 2016, it is vitally important to ensure broad based awareness of programming and services available. Veterans Affairs Canada will continue to work with federal departments and agencies as well as Indigenous organizations to help determine the most common Indigenous languages, and aim to develop communications products outlining Veterans Affairs Canada's main programs and services to be distributed through various means, including to Canadian Rangers patrols.

**Committee Recommendation 4** - That Veterans Affairs Canada incorporate in all its communications to the general public, and in all its program outreach efforts, a message or a question like “Have you worn the uniform?” or “Have you served?” so that Veterans can easily identify themselves as Veterans.

**Government Response** - The Government agrees with the Committee’s recommendation and steps are under way to encourage Indigenous Veterans and non-Indigenous Veterans to self-identify.

Since April 2018, Veterans Affairs Canada has been conducting interviews with Veterans who want to share their stories. The intention is to showcase Veteran profiles and stories with the hope that they will resonate with other Veterans who do not necessarily identify themselves as Veterans. Through public opinion research and regular engagement on the topic of Veteran identity, the Department understands that many modern-day Veterans do not feel as though they are Veterans, as they did not see combat. This issue is at the heart of this recommendation, prompting a call for greater efforts to ensure Veterans self-identify.

Veterans Affairs Canada has been working to improve its communications and broaden outreach to Veterans and Canadians to raise awareness and educate about military service and the realities faced by modern-day Veterans. Veterans Affairs Canada is also currently partnering with other federal departments (e.g. Service Canada, Indigenous Services Canada) to provide Veterans and their families with in-person and web services to make it easier to obtain information on Veterans Affairs Canada’s programs and services. Partnerships greatly enhance the opportunity to reach larger audiences.

Other federal departments that serve Indigenous and non-Indigenous Veterans alike (Indigenous Services Canada, Service Canada) are committed to exploring additional ways to encourage individuals who have served to identify themselves as Veterans.

**Committee Recommendation 5** - That Service Canada add services provided by Veterans Affairs Canada to the list of services it promotes when its representatives travel to meet with communities in remote areas.

**Government Response** - The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation and is committed to offering easy access to high-quality services to all Veterans and their families. Since 2012, Veterans Affairs Canada has partnered with Service Canada to provide general information on Veterans Affairs Canada’s programs and services through its in-person offices and online. This arrangement allows for Veterans Affairs Canada representatives to use Service Canada offices in Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Iqaluit when meeting with Veterans and their families.

To address this specific recommendation, Veterans Affairs Canada is working with Service Canada to explore how these services could potentially be extended to the outreach network in

rural and remote communities. As part of this review, any Veterans Affairs Canada programs or services that are currently not on the service list could be added and promoted by Service Canada representatives who regularly visit communities to provide in-person services.

**Committee Recommendation 6** - That Veterans Affairs Canada work with the territorial governments so that territorial service officers working in northern communities are able to offer local direct access to Veterans Affairs Canada's programs.

**Government Response** - Veterans Affairs Canada remains committed to offering high-quality services to all Veterans regardless of where they live in Canada, including those living in remote and northern communities. As part of its outreach to the North, Veterans Affairs Canada service teams regularly visit Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut to meet in person with Veterans and their families. Front-line staff have also been visiting other remote communities such as Haines Junction (Yukon) and Kuujuaq (Nunavik, Northern Quebec) to provide in-person services. Through its ongoing Case Management service offering, Veterans Affairs Canada service teams provide services to all parts of Canada including rural and remote communities. Veterans living in those communities can also receive in-person home visits on an as needed basis.

Veterans and their families can contact the Veterans Affairs Canada call centre as well as the 24-hour assistance service line. Information on all of Veterans Affairs Canada's programs and services is available on Veterans Affairs Canada's website through which Veterans can access the Benefits Navigator. This client-centric tool helps Veterans obtain the information that is most relevant to their situation and needs. Veterans who prefer interacting online can use *My Veterans Affairs Canada Account* to send front-line staff secure messages or to apply for benefits and track the processing of their applications.

When travelling to the North to provide in-person services, Veterans Affairs Canada service teams work with community partners, service providers, the Canadian Armed Forces (including Canadian Rangers) and Service Canada to raise awareness of Veterans Affairs Canada's programs and benefits while ensuring they are delivered in a culturally-appropriate manner. Building on these efforts, Veterans Affairs Canada will work with territorial government representatives to open the discussion and explore if territorial service officers could play a more direct role in helping Veterans access services. This would include exploring options for service officers already working in the remote communities to assist Veterans Affairs Canada supporting Veterans who live in these communities.

**Committee Recommendation 7** - That Veterans Affairs Canada and the US Department of Veterans Affairs pursue an agreement to ensure better coordination of programs and services available to Indigenous Veterans, and their families, who served in the Canadian Armed Forces and now reside in the United States, and Indigenous Veterans, and their families, who served in the United States Armed Forces and now reside in Canada, including access to the Military Family Resource Centres.

**Government Response** - Established in 1956, a reciprocal agreement between Veterans Affairs Canada and the US Department of Veterans Affairs ensures that each country provides health care benefits and treatments to Veterans of the other country for pensionable conditions. Benefits include medical, surgical and dental treatment, hospital care, and transportation. This agreement provides for the treatment of discharged Canadian Veterans who reside in the United States and, conversely, for discharged American Veterans residing in Canada.

Beyond the reciprocal agreement, in 2016 a joint policy, planning and research network was established between Veterans Affairs Canada and the US Department of Veterans Affairs to share information on issues of strategic importance. This group meets bilaterally on a quarterly basis to support the goals of better understanding the needs of Veterans and their families, developing evidence-based public policy, and exploring innovation and service excellence as it relates to Veterans and their families, including Indigenous Veterans and their families.

Further, Veterans Affairs Canada and the US Department of Veterans Affairs are both part of the Five Eyes International Ministerial Conference, which also includes Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. These five countries have signed a statement of intent to explore cooperative actions to collaborate on strategies in areas of common interest that recognize, support and care for the defence and Veteran communities and their families, including Indigenous Veterans and their families. Canada also has reciprocal agreements with Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and South Africa.

Regarding Military Family Resource Centres, these centres are located on Canadian Armed Forces bases and are an important centre of support to military communities. The Military Family Resource Centres provide programs—such as the Veteran Family Program available to medically released Veterans—and services that empower and encourage strong, independent individuals and families. At this time, the reciprocal agreement between Veterans Affairs Canada and the US Department of Veterans Affairs does not include US Veterans accessing Military Family Resource Centres in Canada or Canadian Veterans accessing a US equivalent. As part of its ongoing efforts, Veterans Affairs Canada will continue to work with the US Department of Veterans Affairs to explore how Veterans of both Canada and the US can best be served.

**Committee Recommendation 8** - That Veterans Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services Canada ensure that the funding parameters for services provided to Indigenous Veterans living on reserve do not create a disadvantage for them in comparison to other Veterans.

**Government Response** - The Government of Canada is committed to meeting the needs of Indigenous Veterans, regardless of where they live. With respect to Indigenous Veterans residing on reserve, Veterans Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services Canada are working collaboratively to ensure that the funding parameters for services do not create a disadvantage for them as compared to other Veterans.

Veterans Affairs Canada supports the well-being of Veterans and encourages all Veterans who feel they have a service-related disability to apply for disability benefits. While it does not deliver health services, Veterans Affairs Canada may cover the cost of treatment benefits, including travel to an appointment, for a condition related to a Veteran's service. Veterans Affairs Canada also encourages all eligible Veterans to take advantage of the programs and benefits that the Department offers. This includes pain and suffering compensation, income replacement and other financial benefits, rehabilitation, and education and training supports. In addition to providing stand-alone services, Veterans Affairs Canada can top up certain benefits to Indigenous Veterans from other federal, provincial/territorial, municipal and non-government organizations, while respecting legislative and funding parameters.

Indigenous Services Canada has a mandate to work collaboratively with partners to improve access to high-quality services for Indigenous peoples; support and empower Indigenous peoples to control the delivery of those services; and improve the socio-economic conditions, quality of life, and safety in their communities. Indigenous Services Canada supports a broad range of services, including health, education, essential social services, housing and infrastructure.

Indigenous Services Canada provides registered First Nations (both on and off reserve) and recognized Inuit in Canada with coverage for a range of medically necessary health benefits through the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program when not covered through private insurance plans or provincial/territorial health and social programs. This Program includes coverage of prescription and over-the-counter medications, dental care, vision care, medical supplies and equipment, mental health counselling and medical transportation to access health services not available on reserve or in the community of residence. An individual who is eligible for health benefits through both Veterans Affairs Canada and the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program may access either program. In general, eligible individuals initially access benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada due to the breadth of benefits available to clients. However, the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program will pay the remaining amount of a client's claim for the eligible benefits not paid for by Veterans Affairs Canada, up to Non-Insured Health Benefits maximums.

The Department also provides primary health care services through the funding of a suite of programs, services and strategies for Inuit communities and First Nations people living on reserve. These services encompass health promotion and disease prevention activities to improve health outcomes and reduce health risks; promote public health; prevent and/or mitigate human health risks associated with communicable diseases and exposure to environmental hazards; and primary care where individuals can access diagnostic, curative, rehabilitative, supportive, palliative/end-of-life care services.

Program investments support healthy child development, mental wellness, healthy living, communicable disease control and management, environmental health, clinical and client care, and home and community care.

Indigenous Veterans, whether they live on or off reserve, can always contact members of the Veterans Affairs Canada service teams, which include Case Managers, Veteran Service Agents and health professionals. Their role is to guide Veterans and coordinate needed benefits and services through the Government of Canada and in partnership with provincial and community programs and non-governmental organizations so that they get the programs and services they need.

Given the roles Veterans Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services Canada play in supporting the overall well-being of Veterans and Indigenous peoples, respectively, work will continue to ensure funding structures do not create any barriers for Indigenous Veterans living on reserve to access the continuum of services and supports offered by both departments.

**Committee Recommendation 9** - That Veterans Affairs Canada provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs with an explanation of the reasons that a settlement agreement was not reached to compensate Métis Veterans of the Second World War and their families.

**Government Response** - In its report, the Committee noted that the Métis National Council was hopeful that compensation would be provided to Métis Veterans of the Second World War. The Government of Canada agrees that addressing the long-standing concerns of Métis Veterans represents a significant step forward in the process of reconciliation with Métis peoples and aligns with the spirit and intent of the Canada-Métis Nation Accord.

As announced in Budget 2019, the Government of Canada proposes \$30 million to recognize the contribution of Métis Veterans to the country's Second World War efforts and to commemorate the sacrifices and achievements of all Métis Veterans.

**Committee Recommendation 10** - That Veterans Affairs Canada continue working with Métis and Métis organizations to ensure that Métis Veterans and their families have access to all benefits and settlements to which they are entitled, and to ensure the access as soon as possible.

**Government Response** - The Government of Canada agrees to continue working with Métis and Métis organizations to ensure that Métis Veterans have access to all benefits and settlements to which they are entitled and to ensure access as soon as possible.

The Government of Canada is working to renew Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples, creating one based on the recognition of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership. Meaningful engagement and policy co-development through a variety of mechanisms, including the Permanent Bilateral Mechanism with the Métis National Council and its governing members, are important processes and will continue to occur on an ongoing basis.

Veterans Affairs Canada has expanded its outreach to Veterans and their families in rural and remote communities and ensures a regular presence in the territories and other northern communities, meeting with Veterans and their families to help them receive services and benefits to which they are entitled, regardless of where they live.



**Committee Recommendation 11** - That Veterans Affairs Canada take steps to bring together representatives from associations representing Indigenous Veterans so that it can share information about its programs and help create an environment where they can regularly communicate their various concerns.

**Government Response** - The Government understands the importance of seeking the views and perspectives of associations that support Indigenous Veterans and is committed to exploring opportunities to bring together representatives from such associations.

Work is under way within the Department to improve communications and consultation with Indigenous Veterans' Associations, for example through the Ministerial Advisory Groups that will continue to prioritize the representation of Indigenous Veterans associations. At present, three out of the six groups maintain Indigenous representation. Members of the Ministerial Advisory Groups are selected to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

The Department also invited representatives from Indigenous Veterans' associations to participate in the 2018 national stakeholder and regional stakeholder summits. These forums provide opportunities to share information about Veterans Affairs Canada's programs and services and for issues and concerns to be raised and discussed among other stakeholders and departmental officials, including the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

**Committee Recommendation 12** - That Veterans Affairs Canada review the eligibility criteria of its programs that provide funding for war memorials so that remote communities wanting to honour the memory of their Veterans are better able to do so.

**Government Response** - The Government agrees that the memory of the contributions, accomplishments and sacrifices of all of Canada's Veterans, including Indigenous Veterans, must be preserved for future generations. To this end, Veterans Affairs Canada plays a central role in the Government with respect to the commemoration of all those who have served our country post-Confederation in the cause of peace and freedom. Commemoration is achieved through various initiatives, including the *Heroes Remember* web feature, the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, learning opportunities, events and ceremonies and financial support for commemorative initiatives.

Through its Commemorative Partnership Program, Veterans Affairs Canada has supported commemorative activities and memorials dedicated to our Indigenous Veterans and fallen heroes. Since 2016-17, Veterans Affairs Canada has entered into 22 partnerships (totalling approximately \$130,000) with organizations to support commemorative initiatives with an Indigenous focus. For example, Veterans Affairs Canada has recently partnered with the Nipissing First Nation for their Mikwendmaadaa Memorial Project in the amount of \$25,000, for the construction of a new memorial in their community.

With respect to war memorials, financial support may be provided for the construction, restoration or expansion of a community war memorial that commemorates the achievements

and sacrifices of those who have served Canada since Confederation (1867). Eligible recipients are non-profit and for-profit organizations, as well as Canadian provinces, territories and municipalities. Organizations that wish to apply for funding are encouraged to contact the Department to discuss potential projects prior to commencing work.

Veterans Affairs Canada remains committed to ensuring that all Veterans and those who died in service are honoured and strives to expand commemorative reach in all areas of Canada, including remote communities. As such, the Department will review its eligibility criteria for war memorial funding, in light of concerns brought forward in the report.