

VOLUME OF PENDING FILES

- The Government is fully committed to the health and well-being of Veterans and their families.
- Since 2016, Veterans Affairs Canada has seen a 40% increase in disability benefit applications, this includes an increase of more than 75% in first applications.
- In response to this increase, Veterans Affairs Canada continues to streamline the disability benefits process, to simplify the decision-making process for some medical conditions, and to work with its partners to speed up access to service health records.
- We know there is more to be done – that is why we are working on a number of new initiatives to make more decisions faster and putting Veterans first.

BACKGROUND- VOLUME OF PENDING FILES

On February 10, 2020, Lee Berthiaume published an article for *The Canadian Press* titled “Backlog of applications for veterans' benefits grows by the thousands.” He wrote that more Canadian Veterans than ever are waiting to find out whether they qualify for disability benefits, despite repeated government promises and efforts to get the situation under control. He also identified that new figures from Veterans Affairs Canada show more than 44,000 applications from Veterans for assistance were sitting in the queue at the end of September, a 10 per cent increase from only six months earlier. The Minister of Veterans Affairs noted that Veterans deserve to receive their benefits in a timely manner, but he would not say whether more money will be forthcoming.

Current State (June 8, 2020):

- Improvements to decision-making processes and the hiring and training of new staff have significantly increased production rates. Yet these efforts have been unable to keep pace with the growing number of Veterans and members seeking benefits and well-being support.
- In 2015-16, VAC received 45,000 applications and processed 42,544. In 2019-20, VAC received 63,100 and processed 57,600. This represents an increase of 35% in the number of processed.
- Over the past several years, there has been a significant increase in demand for services and benefits. The reasons for the increase include:
 - the growing need for mental health services;
 - rising number of medically releasing Veterans;
 - the introduction of Pension for Life; and
 - improved outreach and communication about benefits and services.
- In 2019-20, the wait times were 41.4 weeks for first applications, 17.9 weeks for reassessments and 29.9 weeks for departmental reviews.
- As of September 30, 2020, the total number of pending applications was 45,349. Of this total, 19,741 were waiting more than our 16-week service standard (backlog).
- Applications are fast tracked for those who are medically at risk (e.g. palliative, advanced age, etc.) or, have an immediate, unmet health need related to their claimed condition.

Veterans Affairs Canada Action:

- *Budget 2018 provided funding of \$36.7 million over two years to increase service delivery capacity and to hire temporary employees which resulted in an increase in the processing of applications. If not for this funding, combined with the gains achieved through streamlining and process innovation, the number of applications waiting to be processed would be more than double its current size.*
- As a result of new service delivery capacity funding of \$87.7 million in the 2020-21 Supplementary Estimates (A), we will retain and hire additional resources dedicated to making decisions and reducing wait times. At the same time, we will explore innovative measures to more efficiently process future applications. By 2022, we must be positioned with new processes and tools to work faster. As a result, we are also hiring additional resources dedicated to reviewing our processes, developing innovative solutions and changing the way we work.
- If not for this funding, combined with the gains achieved through streamlining and process innovation, the number of applications waiting to be processed would be more than double its current size.
- In 2019-2020, the Department began modifying the organizational structure to group together all employees needed to quickly process a disability benefit application (Veteran Benefit Teams).
 - This will break down silos, reduce hand-offs and provide a more efficient decision making process.
 - This structure was fully implemented on June 1, 2020.
- The Department also began using the Canadian Armed Forces Health Information System in 2019-2020.
 - This direct access to health information will minimize the time required to order health records.
 - Full implementation for a total of 50 users is scheduled for December 2020.
- In addition to these initiatives, the Department hired additional temporary employees to work on disability benefit processing which includes making decisions and payments.
- The Department recognizes that to provide faster decisions for Veterans and members by reducing the volume of pending disability benefit applications, significant changes are required. This is why we are working on a number of new initiatives.

Pandemic Period

- The outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) has placed a strain on Canadians, including Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members and their families, and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) employees. Although it is a challenging period, we have adapted quickly, ensuring staff are getting benefits to Veterans in greatest need.
- During this period, we have been reaching out to vulnerable Veterans to ensure they know we are here to support them during these extraordinary times. Almost all of our employees are now working remotely, where they are answering calls, responding to secure messages, making decisions on disability applications and issuing payments.
- We have enabled decision-makers to work more efficiently, using available evidence to reach the fastest decision possible. The Department has made adjustments and modified processes during this critical period and will build on lessons learned as we move forward.

Over \$450 million in new benefits have been sent to Veterans, and more than 20,000 disability benefit decisions have been made since the pandemic began.