

APPLICATION DELAYS FOR FEMALE VETERANS AND FRANCOPHONE VETERANS

- Veterans Affairs Canada is looking closely at the delays in processing applications for female and francophone applicants to determine how this can be improved.
- Veterans Affairs Canada is examining the wait times for female Veterans and will be developing new approaches to consider the unique service experiences of females.
- To address the wait time for francophone Veterans, the department hired new employees, dedicated to making disability benefits decisions, who are either bilingual or who have identified French as their first language. A unit has been established to work exclusively on French applications.
- We take these wait time discrepancies very seriously and I can assure you, we are committed to the well-being of all Veterans.

BACKGROUND - DISABILITY DECISIONS WAIT TIMES

In September 2018, the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) released a report titled, “Meeting Expectations: Timely and Transparent Decisions for Canada’s Ill and Injured Veterans”. Within the report, the OVO brings to light concerns related to Veterans Affairs Canada’s application processing times for francophone and female Veterans. Specifically, the report noted that both female and francophone Veterans experienced longer disability benefits wait times.

Current State – Female Veterans:

- Of the approximate 45,369 pending applications, 7,053 are for female applicants. Of these 7,053, 3,266 are over the service standard, which is considered backlog.

Veterans Affairs Canada Action – Female Veterans:

- In response to the 2018 Office of Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) report, *Meeting Expectations: Timely and Transparent Decisions for Canada’s Ill and Injured Veterans*, which stated that female Veterans were waiting longer for decisions than male Veterans, Veterans Affairs Canada undertook an internal review of the disability adjudication process, tools and instruments.
- Although the review confirmed the Ombudsman’s statements that female disability benefit applicants are waiting longer than males for certain disability benefit decisions, it determined that there is not one main cause for the delay.
- However, the review identified potential issues in many disability benefit adjudication tools and processes which could contribute to inequities in the time spent on making decisions for females.
- For this reason, Veterans Affairs Canada has begun taking steps to address these potential issues for female Veterans as well as non-binary Veterans by:
 - undertaking further reviews to more clearly identify the source(s) of the issue (e.g. training, tools, how the tools are being applied, etc.)
 - after identifying the source(s), eliminating the unintended issues in tools and instruments to support disability benefit decision-making.

- The Department recently released the document titled, *Timely disability benefits decisions: Strategic direction for improving wait times*. Within this document, the department outlines many initiatives that will be used to address the long standing issue of wait times for disability benefit decisions.
- All of the initiatives outlined in the document, as well as current practices, will include GBA+ plus reviews and assessments. This will help ensure equitable treatment in all benefit processing and decision-making.
- Additionally, the department has established a new Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans. We know from discussions with Veterans and stakeholders that the specific needs of female Veterans have not been properly addressed, and that more needs to be done to understand and support these individuals. This office will help the Department fulfill its responsibility to provide all Veterans the care and support they deserve.

Current State – Francophone wait times:

- Of the approximate 45,369 pending applications, 8,898 are considered French applications. Of the 8,898, 4,688 are over the service standard, which is considered backlog.

Veterans Affairs Canada Action – Francophone wait times:

- Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) has developed strategies to address the discrepancy in wait times for French applications as part of VAC's commitment to better serve our French speaking applicants.
- While approximately 15% of VAC's applications each year are in French, since 2015 we have seen a nearly 30% increase in the number of applications in French.
- Currently, with the new staff we've recently hired, almost 30% of our decision makers are bilingual or French is their first language. As we have approximately 70 individuals left to hire, once we are at full capacity, the total will be close to 35%.
- The Department implemented a new Veteran Benefit Teams structure which groups all the resources required to process a disability application from beginning to end into one team.

- Part of this new structure included the establishment of a dedicated French unit in Montreal to address the discrepancy in service standards between French and English claims.
 - As these nurses used French medical terminology in their training, they can more easily interpret French medical files and ultimately reach faster decisions.
- A bilingual unit was also established and this team is focusing predominately on French claims in conjunction with the French team. This is important because some French applications include a mixture of French and English documentation. Additional bilingual Medical Advisors were also hired.
- While it can take time for disability decision-makers to gain proficiency and be considered fully trained , it is expected that we will soon see a reduction in the wait times for French applications given that the French and bilingual teams has been in place for more than one year.
- Additionally, we are temporarily increasing the number of decision-making staff with the intention to hire more than 300 full-time staff for two years.
 - As part of this initiative, we intend to hire a greater number of French and bilingual staff to further improve wait times.
 - To ensure greater success in attracting French and bilingual candidates, the hiring processes were run nationally and advertised with the ability to work virtually.
 - We expect the first cohort of new hires to begin making decisions no later than January 2021.
- The department will continue to monitor the intake and completion of French disability applications and implement changes to address this issue.