



## **REPORTS ON ACVA COMMITTEE HEARINGS**

**Name of Committee:** *Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs*  
**Report prepared by:** *Jeff Clarke*  
**Date and time:** *October 14, 2020; 11:03 a.m. – 12:17 p.m.*  
**Location:** *Videoconference*  
**Subject:** *Election of Chair and Committee Business*

### **Members in Attendance**

- William Amos, Sean Casey, Marie-France Lalonde, Darrell Samson (Lib.)
- Rachel Blaney (NDP)
- John Brassard, Colin Carrie, Cathay Wagantall, Dan Albas (CPC)
- Luc Desilets (BQ)

### **Witnesses**

None

### **Summary**

The Clerk opened the meeting by requesting nominations. Mr. Samson nominated Mr. May as Chair, and the motion **carried**. Ms. Wagantall nominated Mr. Brassard as Vice-Chair; Mr. Samson nominated Mr. Desilets as Second Vice-Chair; both motions **carried**.

The Chair then outlined some procedural matters and etiquette related to videoconferencing.

At the request of the Chair, Ms. Lalonde tabled a variety of routine motions. In summary, these concerned:

- the Committee's retention of analysts (the analyst described his role briefly);
- the establishment of a five-member subcommittee on agenda and procedure;
- authorization of the Chair to hold meetings and receive evidence when the Committee is under quorum;
- time limits of 10 minutes for witnesses' opening statements, and for six-minute first rounds of questions, and five-minute second rounds (2.5 minutes for the Bloc and NDP);
- a requirement for materials be bilingual before distribution by the Clerk;
- arrangements for working meals;
- reimbursement of witnesses' travel expenses;
- allowance for each member to be allowed one staff member for *in camera* meetings and one per party, and that the Clerk keep a transcript of *in camera* meetings for staff reference;
- 48-hour notice for any substantive motion be considered by committee, with some time and travel conditions; and
- provisions for the Chair to communicate with members not on the Committee about orders of reference respecting bills.



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Ms. Blaney moved amendments that the opening statements be limited to five minutes, and for a third round of questions. After discussion by Mr. Brassard, Mr. Amos, Ms. Lalonde, Mr. Albas, Ms. Wagantall, and Mr. Casey, the amendment **carried**. The Committee informally agreed that the Chair would have discretion to allow witnesses more time. With this amendment, all of these motions **carried**.

Members then advanced several motions and notices of motions for consideration of subjects for the Committee to study:

- Mr. Casey moved that the Committee agree that all substantive motions adopted in first session of 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament be readopted without modification or amendment. Ms. Blaney stated that she had understood that the Subcommittee would review this and start a work plan; Mr. Brassard agreed. Ms. Wagantall queried whether the motion was out of order; another parliamentary Clerk (on consultation from the Committee Clerk) stated that each subject for study would have to be raised in a separate motion. The Committee informally agreed to discuss such matters in Subcommittee. At the request of the Chair, Mr. Casey **withdrew the motion**.
- Mr. Desilets read notice of four motions, for the Committee to study: arrears and benefits of disabled Veterans; living conditions of Veterans in major urban centres and the effect of COVID-19 on them; delays in the administrative processing of files for Anglophone and Francophone Veterans; and challenges and obstacles of minority (women, LGBTQ+, ethnic) Veterans.
- Mr. Brassard read notice of motions for the Committee to discuss: Supplementary Estimates B 2019-20 and invite the Minister to appear, before November 27; the backlog in processing Disability Benefit claims; the financial health of Veterans' organizations after COVID-19; and the efficacy of psychiatric service dogs.
- Mr. Casey read notice of motions for the Committee to discuss federal supports and services to caregivers and families; and a long-term strategy for commemoration.

Overall, the tone of the meeting was amicable, and all Members expressed a general attitude of collaboration and consensus throughout discussion of Committee business.

### Follow-up Items

*None*

### Next Steps

There was no mention of the next scheduled meeting for ACVA. Negotiations are ongoing regarding a permanent schedule for the Committee. It was agreed that the first meeting prior to the whole Committee meeting shall be a Subcommittee meeting to determine the work plan for this session.



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**Name of Committee:** *Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs*  
**Report prepared by:** *Jeff Clarke*  
**Date and time:** *October 27, 2020; 3:45 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.*  
**Location:** *Videoconference*  
**Subject:** *Backlog of Disability Benefit Claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs*

### Members in Attendance

- William Amos, Sean Casey, Marie-France Lalonde, Darrell Samson, Andy Fillmore (Lib.)
- Rachel Blaney (NDP)
- John Brassard, Colin Carrie, Kyle Seeback (CPC)
- Luc Desilets (BQ)

### Witnesses

- Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs (VAC)
- Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery

### Summary

Gen Natynczyk gave a short statement, noting that the pandemic has presented an extraordinary challenge to Veterans and the organizations that serve them. VAC began making adjustments immediately, with a new working group, remote work for employees, with related investments in networking resources and new remote-work procedures. VAC continues to connect directly to Veterans and their families and stakeholders, while striving to ensure that Veterans and families continue to receive their services and benefits. VAC has adapted these services and benefits through such means as extended telehealth coverage and reimbursement of related costs. VAC also focuses on continuing its mission with care, compassion, and respect.

Questions from the members focused on several topics:

- **PBO report on the backlog** (Brassard, Seeback, Carrie, Samson) – Gen Natynczyk agreed with the PBO report, noting the need for more staff as VAC continues to change processes. Mr. Harris noted that the report did not consider several factors, such as VAC's digitization of its approach to hearing loss, an improved search function, the Veteran benefit teams, easier ways for Veterans to apply, VAC's work with health professionals who have to fill out forms, and training to help staff make decisions more quickly.
- **State of the backlog** (Seeback, Casey, Carrie, Blaney, Fillmore, Desilets) – Gen Natynczyk said that the first backlog dates to the early 1920s – but VAC aims to eliminate the current one. VAC generally accepts applications with missing information, and is improving that process, so that a form generally goes ahead only when it is complete. He said that the number of applications in the Department is now around 40,000; with a recent reduction in the number of applications past the 16-week service standard from 23,000 by 15%. He cautioned that VAC cannot control the number or type of applications coming in, but is benchmarking its results against those of Australia and the US. The main obstacles, he said,



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were the increasing number of claims since 2016 and the complexity of the system as defined in legislation. Mr. Harris stated that VAC expects to reduce the number of files that have been in process for more than 16 weeks to below 5000 by March 2022, and expects to make about 80,000 decisions. He noted that some are more complex, and require referrals to health professionals, or involve multiple disabilities.

- **Streamlining adjudication** (Brassard, Blaney, Carrie) – Gen Natynczyk said that VAC has adjusted the kind of documentation it requires, accepting incomplete applications when a diagnosis or input from a health professional might follow. The Veterans Affairs Assistance Service expedites access to treatment. Meanwhile, the Veteran Emergency Fund has been expanded during the pandemic, allowing approval of up to \$10,000 before a claim is submitted. He noted that it would be very difficult to quantify the per-application cost, given VAC's overhead. Mr. Harris concurred that applicants can provide additional information after applying, and that there are exceptions to providing care in palliative or urgent needs. However, legislation still requires VAC to meet the essential requirements of adjudication: attribution and assessment.
- **Automatic clearing of applications** (Desilets) – In reference to a motion made in the House, Gen Natynczyk said that as VAC moves forward with the mandate the Minister has received, the Department's commitment is to look at automatic approvals for the most common injuries and illnesses associated with service.
- **Processing times for Francophone Veterans** (Desilets) – Gen Natynczyk lauded the Ombudsman for bringing to light the issue of longer processing times for Francophone Veterans. To correct this, VAC is hiring more Francophone and bilingual staff, but it has become apparent that for certain positions, they must also have studied medicine in French. Mr. Harris said that VAC plans to reach parity on this measurement, hopefully by the end of next year, noting that about 28% of its newly hired adjudicators were either Francophone or bilingual. However, he cautioned that training takes time.
- **Processing times for female Veterans** (Fillmore) – Mr. Harris stated that 16% of applications with VAC are from female Veterans, which is slightly overrepresented, and that they take a bit longer to process. VAC is undertaking a GBA+ analysis to understand this, with the aim of ensuring equitable treatment across the board. He posited that VAC has a long history of learning patterns for male Veterans, but conditions may be different for women, and the system would have to adjust to this. Gen Natynczyk noted that VAC has hosted three summits on female Veterans, while the Minister created an Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans.
- **Human resources** (Brassard, Casey, Carrie, Amos) – Gen Natynczyk said that VAC is following Treasury Board guidance for working during the pandemic: employees are encouraged to work remotely; all VAC buildings are accessible, with physical barriers in place but at a maximum of 10% occupancy. A small number of critical functions remain onsite (less than 100 of 3500 employees). Yet VAC remains 95% operational on some measures, and sick leave has actually dropped from the previous year. The call centre's response time has actually improved. He noted that the workforce is extremely dedicated, but attention to their morale and mental health are important. So, VAC has held 25 town halls with employees, and sends out weekly or biweekly messages. Also, a survey in the summer showed that most feel supported, and have the information and equipment they need. Mr. Harris said that some productivity outputs, such as payments, are easy to quantify, and VAC is meeting its performance on that indicator from before the pandemic.



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- **Unions (Casey)** – Gen Natynczyk said that the adjudication process involves membership from several unions. The vast majority come from PSAC (for VAC, called the Union of VAC Employees), and perform functions such as administrative decision-making. Complex injuries require medical professionals, represented by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada. Those involved in payments to Veterans, as well as occupational therapists and lawyers, have their own unions.
- **Hiring and training (Blaney, Seebach, Amos, Brassard)** – Gen Natynczyk said that VAC is working now on what the Government stated in June, with two years of hiring the best people it can. VAC has had about 1600 applications for about 300 roles. He noted that VAC was making a serious effort to bring more Veterans into the ranks, but in the right jobs and with the right culture. Mr. Harris noted that 7% of the new hires have CAF experience, but the figure may be higher, as some choose not to self-declare. He also said that the new hires were being targeted to high-volume applications, allowing experienced employees to deal with more-complex files. He pointed out that the pandemic has also been an opportunity to revamp VAC's training approach.
- **VAC measures to address the backlog (Blaney, Lalonde, Brassard, Samson)** – Gen Natynczyk said that VAC's plan to reduce the backlog was not just about people, but also about changing processes, cutting red tape, bundling decisions, using technology, and delegating decisions to the lowest possible level – while maintaining care, compassion, and respect. Mr. Harris pointed out a variety of measures VAC was taking to reduce the backlog, in addition to the front-end work of hiring more people. VAC was limiting the number of applications that need to go to medical referrals, which takes time. VAC has also reorganized teams so that a variety of professionals involved in each decision are together: intake officers, nurse adjudicators, and so on. This reduces the number of handoffs, which contribute to delays. VAC is also rolling out new technology and tools that digitize operations. This involves not only VAC's interface with Library and Archives Canada and CAF (facilitating the sifting through vast medical and military records), but also to encourage more Veterans to apply digitally, which saves time. Still, VAC will support those Veterans who still prefer a paper approach. Gen Natynczyk noted that the proportion of digital applications has risen from about half to three quarters since the pandemic began.

### Follow-up Items

*None*