

SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS OF MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

- The Government of Canada recognizes the unique needs of those impacted by sexual trauma during their service in the Canadian Armed Forces.
- Veterans Affairs Canada places the highest priority on ensuring Veterans and their families have the services they need when and where they need them.
- Veterans Affairs Canada has a continuum of programs and supports for those who become ill or injured in the line of duty. This includes those impacted by military sexual trauma.
- We are ensuring access to specialized services and supports required to appropriately address the impacts on their personal health and well-being. We are dedicated to meeting their needs.
- We are actively working with the Department of National Defence's Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre to develop additional supports for those impacted by military sexual trauma.

WHEN PRESSED:

Q1 – How many cases came forward from the Heyder-Beattie Class Action and how efficient was our decision-making process around those cases?

The court appointed Claims Administrator data notes that 23,969 claims were approved for payment.

Under the Final Settlement Agreement, Veterans Affairs Canada committed to establishing a Dedicated Unit to process applications. This included both new applications for VAC Disability Benefits and Departmental Reviews, for those seeking to establish eligibility for Enhanced Compensation under the Agreement's Compensation Grid.

The Unit became operational on May 25, 2020 and processed applications related to the Class Action on a priority basis. Although the Class Action period has closed, VAC has kept this team in place. They process claims for CAF and RCMP, as well as any claim related to sexual trauma (part of the class action or not). Between **June 1, 2020 and October 22, 2024**, the Unit has adjudicated **4,220** applications, with a **94%** favourability rate.

Source: BlueZoneCompleted 2024-10-22

Q2 – Have you consulted people with lived and living experience (PWLLE) on the Peer Support Program delivery?

The peer support program is based on a 'human-centred design' approach. This approach includes engaging with persons with lived and living experience (PWLLE). Thus, this program and pilot are being co-developed with the community.

Consultations with persons with lived and living experience were held in the Fall of 2021 to help create the scope of the peer support program that is representative of the needs of current and former CAF members who have experienced sexual trauma during their military service. The [Consultation Report](#) was published on March 29, 2022.

The initial launch of the Formal Peer Support Groups included an evaluation component, which resulted in updates and revisions to the Formal Peer Support Group service. After every Formal Peer Support Group session, participants were encouraged to share their feedback anonymously through post-session feedback surveys. Additionally, they were asked to participate in an exit interview once the program concluded. All feedback from participants has led to updates and changes to the Peer Support Program.

Participants in the Informal Peer Support Groups are also encouraged to complete post-session surveys. These tools gather feedback on their experiences, and identify ongoing areas for improvement. This input will help to ensure the service meets participants' needs based on a model of continuous improvement.

In May 2024, the SMSRC Partnerships Team hosted six community consultations. During each session, valuable input was gathered on the Informal Peer Support Group service and other potential peer support services aimed at enhancing the community. The SMSRC Partnerships Team facilitated these consultations and compiled the findings into a Summary Report, which was shared with the Peer Support Program team in November 2024 and will help guide future enhancements to the program.

The SMSRC organized four hour-long information sessions to provide the latest updates on the Peer Support Program. These sessions were conducted in collaboration with VAC Project team members and were offered virtually via an MS Teams Live Event, with no registration required. In June and July, we hosted two sessions in English and two in French. Participants could join the English sessions on June 25 or July 9, or French sessions on June 26 or July 11. Each session included a moderated 15-minute Q&A period, allowing participants to ask questions anonymously to program staff. Additionally, a trained counsellor from the SMSRC's 24/7 line was available to provide support if needed.

Consulting people with lived and living experience (PWLLE) is invaluable for the MST Peer Support Program, as it ensures the program's delivery is authentic, empathetic, and effectively addresses the real needs of its participants.

Q3 – What other peer support services will be delivered specifically to individuals affected by sexual trauma during their military service?

Below is a list of the current peer support services available, as well as the potential services that will be offered through the Peer Support Program for individuals affected by sexual misconduct and/or Military Sexual Trauma (MST).

Current Peer Support Services

Formal Peer Support Group offers ten, 90-minute virtual peer support sessions co-facilitated by a trained peer supporter with lived experience of military sexual trauma and a mental health professional who ensure a nurturing environment for both participants and the facilitator. Sessions are guided by educational materials that cover topics such as trauma, moral injury, coping and self-care, and are supported by peer group discussion. Participants are expected to attend all sessions.

Informal Peer Support Group offering up to eight, 90-minute virtual peer support sessions hosted by trained peer supporters affected by military sexual trauma. These groups are drop-in style, so participants are welcome to attend as many sessions as they wish. Topics discussed during the sessions will be based on participant input and need.

Peer Support Activities: A variety of casual peer support activities and events that are designed for peers to connect. Examples include the two-part virtual activity *Discover Creative Coping: A Peer Support Program Event*, held in July 2024, and the

Remembrance Day and Veterans' Week Peer Support Event in November 2024. Additional activities are planned for Fall 2024 and Winter 2025, such as the *Peer Support Holiday Event* in December 2024, and a *Men's Coffee Chat* in March 2025.

Future Potential Peer Support Services

One-to-one Peer Support: Peer support is provided between a peer and peer supporter who have lived experience in common. Participants will be matched with a peer who has been hired and trained as a peer supporter and has lived-experience of military sexual trauma. Offered virtually or in-person. Locations of in-person meetings will be chosen based on preference and will be neutral and safe for both individuals. This option will also be available virtually through a meeting platform for those who are not yet comfortable in meeting their peers in-person.

Text and talk application: Anonymous and confidential app offering individual support with a peer supporter. The Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre is working in close cooperation with Defence Research and Development Canada on this text and talk mobile application that will serve as a virtual tool that program participants can use to locate peer supporters in their community and that will support virtual communications. Additional access to the SMSRC 24/7 line supportive counsellors will also be available through the application.**Q4 – Why did the contract end with Togetherall, the online peer support platform?**

The Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre (SMSRC), in collaboration with Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), offers a peer support program for people affected by military sexual trauma (MST). From June 2022 until March 2024, SMSRC had a contract with Togetherall to provide an anonymous online platform for people in the Defence community affected by MST. The contract with Togetherall ended on March 29, 2024.

Given the diverse feedback received on the service, SMSRC are taking the time to reevaluate the requirement for this type of service through consultations with the community. SMSRC and VAC will continue to support the delivery of other peer support program services, such as the Formal Peer Support group, Informal Peer Support group, and Peer Support Activities.

Q5 – What are the benefits of peer support, and how does offering it virtually enhance accessibility and effectiveness?

Peer support offers numerous benefits, including shared understanding, empathy, and validation of experiences. Participants can gain coping strategies, reduce isolation, and build community. Peer support fosters personal growth, empowerment, and resilience. It provides a safe space for open dialogue and can complement professional interventions. The sense of belonging and shared experiences contributes to improved mental health and well-being.

Offering peer support virtually presents several benefits compared to in-person sessions. Virtual peer support increases accessibility, enabling individuals from diverse geographic locations to participate without the need for travel. This is particularly valuable for CAF members, who can attend sessions from anywhere they are deployed, ensuring consistent access to support. The virtual format also improves effectiveness by providing flexibility in scheduling, making it easier for participants to integrate sessions into their busy lives. Additionally, virtual sessions can foster a more comfortable and private environment, encouraging participants to share their experiences more openly and honestly.

BACKGROUND – SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS OF MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

Under a clear mandate to the Minister of National Defence in Budget 2021, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) is actively working with the Department of National Defence (DND) to ensure support is available to Veterans affected by military sexual trauma. This includes access to peer support as well as services provided by DND's Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre (SMSRC).

VAC places the highest priority on ensuring Veterans and their families, including those impacted by military sexual trauma, have the services they need when and where they need them. Current VAC supports are through a suite of benefits including mental health services, disability and related health care benefits, rehabilitation services, financial benefits and support to families.

With the understanding that each person can be impacted differently, our commitment to support these diverse needs includes a number of approaches:

- Veteran access to DND's Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre services, including 24/7 phone line for confidential support as well as access to ongoing assistance when needed;
- VAC Assistance Service offers Veterans one-to-one mental health services 365 days a year, 24/7 free of charge;
- 10 outpatient Operational Stress Injury (OSI) Clinics across the country comprising multi-disciplinary teams who have expertise in military-related traumas;
- 11 Operational Stress Injury satellite service sites to help Veterans access services closer to where they live;
- All Operational Stress Injury Clinics and satellite service sites offer face to face and virtual services;
- A network of Medavie Blue Cross registered mental health professionals across Canada to which Veterans have access.

Veterans and/or CAF members who have a physical or mental health condition related to sexual trauma and related to their military service, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and/or physical conditions, are encouraged to apply to VAC for disability benefits. VAC has a dedicated unit to process these applications.

As of April 1, 2022, Veterans living in Canada who apply for a disability benefit for certain mental health conditions – as well as those who have already applied and are awaiting a decision – are automatically qualified for mental health coverage. Under the Mental Health Benefits program, Veterans have up to two years of coverage for treatment for conditions such as anxiety and depressive disorders, or trauma-and-stress-related disorders.

In addition to its existing suite of services and programs, VAC continues to work closely with the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre and CAF-DND counterparts and partners to enhance supports specific to sexual trauma related to military service. To highlight a few key initiatives:

- In March 2020, VAC announced its Office of Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans. The office works to identify systemic issues specific to women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans, and to advance gender equality, diversity and inclusion for all Veterans.
- In December 2021, the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre's mandate was expanded to include Veterans. This means Veterans now have access to the important supports provided by the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre. This is in addition to compensation and support that Veterans Affairs Canada can provide to individuals with a medical condition related to sexual trauma suffered while in service.
- VAC and DND co-developed a peer support program for survivors of military sexual trauma. This responds to the settlement of the Canadian Armed Forces - Department of National Defence Sexual Misconduct Class Action (also known as the *Heyder-Beattie* Class Action) and legal obligations on implementation of the restorative engagement program under the final settlement agreement.
 - The Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre (SMSRC) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) project teams completed 10 Formal Peer Support Groups by November 2024. The Formal Peer Support Group offers up to 10 virtual sessions (e.g., coping strategies, building resilience, etc.) via MS Teams that are 90 minutes each. English and French groups are available.
 - These ongoing groups are led by a trained peer supporter with lived experience and co-facilitated by a VAC mental health professional. They consist of diverse educational material and provide a safe space to engage in Peer Support.
 - Feedback has been positive, with 86% of participants who completed the Formal Group post-session survey agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would recommend these sessions to future participants.
 - In May 2024, the first Informal Peer Support Group was initiated by SMSRC and VAC. The Informal Peer Support Group service offers a space for individuals affected by military sexual trauma to connect and explore healing among peers. There are up to eight drop-in 90-minute virtual group sessions on MS Teams. English and French groups are available.
 - The Informal Peer Support Groups are led by trained peer supporters with lived experience. The sessions offer a confidential space and foster mutual support and understanding for the peer participants.
 - A new Informal Peer Support Group began on October 15, 2024, offering up to eight virtual sessions and concludes on December 3, 2024.

These initiatives are part of the implementation of supports announced in Budget 2021, that address broader Government of Canada objectives related to the National Action Plan to end Gender-Based Violence and addressing sexual misconduct and culture change in the Canadian Armed Forces.