

NOVA SCOTIA INQUIRY

- Since this tragedy, Veterans Affairs Canada has made changes to help improve the health and well-being of Veterans.
- This includes improved case management services, more robust mental health supports, and a re-designed transition process in partnership with our colleagues in the Canadian Armed Forces.
- The Government of Canada actively supported the work of the Nova Scotia Inquiry, and participated in the working group.
- Veterans Affairs continues to implement improvements in our support of the health and well-being of Veterans and their families.

WHEN PRESSED:

Q1 – What was VAC's role in support of the inquiry?

VAC was the lead coordinating federal entity at the Assistant Deputy Minister level for all federal entities involved in this matter, to ensure common understanding and alignment between all impacted departments. VAC also lead a Communications Committee with representation from the other federal entities involved.

Q2 – What are the next steps for VAC?

VAC is a member of the Government of Nova Scotia working group that was struck in response to the report's recommendations.

Q3 – What program or service changes did VAC recommend as a result of this tragedy?

A significant focus of the Inquiry was to determine what changes, if any, needed to be made across multiple jurisdictions.

Based on the findings of VAC's internal review and actions, the following changes have been introduced:

- **New case management tools:** we have built a suite of case management tools that uses technology to reduce the administrative burden on case managers so that they have more time to work directly with Veterans and their families.
- **Recruitment of case managers:** we continue to recruit case managers through ongoing staffing and recruitment from within the federal government, recruitment of qualified professionals external to the federal government, and through the Federal Student Work Experience Program;
- **Expansion of OSI services:** we have expanded our Operational Stress Injury (OSI) Clinic services with satellite service sites located across Canada.
- **Enhanced transition services:** we are working alongside DND/CAF to provide early intervention into Veterans' cases to address barriers to successful transition, ensure timely access to program benefits and services, and provide a coordinated approach to case management;
- **Re-design of transition process:** Alongside CAF, we are working on a re-designed transition process which will provide all releasing CAF members with a customized release experience, based on individual needs. The objective of the transition process is to maintain/improve support to releasing CAF members, particularly those ill and injured, in all domains of well-being;
- **Introduction of Joint Suicide Prevention Strategy:** The introduction of the Joint Suicide Prevention Strategy (released October 2017), a holistic and evidence based suicide prevention strategy that provides information and effective ways to improve assistance to Veterans and their families, including during the transition from military to life after service.

- Implemented **training on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Trauma Informed Training**: IPV highlights the health and psychological impact of IPV and some of the major theoretical models regarding the causation. This course discusses screening and assessing risk for both those who are abusing and those who are abused. Trauma Informed Training provides participants with key practice skills and strategies using case scenarios and interactive exercises to support practicing essential skills.
- **VAC HealthShare** app has been implemented to help with the sharing of medical records. VAC Healthshare routes the Veterans' medical documents and healthcare providers' invoice digitally to VAC, it ensures required data is collected for VAC finance.

Q4 – Have the suggested improvements been implemented?

Yes, the above mentioned program and service improvements have all been implemented or are part of ongoing work. The care of our Veterans and their families is our top priority.

Q5 – What is VAC doing to prevent Veteran suicides?

One suicide is one too many. VAC has a number of services aimed at reducing the pressures that can lead to suicide. We continue to look for ways to improve our mental health programs and services to increase Veterans' overall well-being, and to ensure Veterans get the support they need and deserve.

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and VAC have a Joint Suicide Prevention Strategy that considers the risks of suicide from a holistic perspective. The strategy builds upon a strong foundation of programs, services, and supports available to ensure those serving our country, Veterans and their families get the help they need.

Through the work of this joint strategy, more psychologists and psychiatrists have been added to our healthcare teams to treat our members and Veterans; technological improvements have been made to offer remote counselling; and mental skills training and performance coaching is offered to those in high-stress positions.

Our suicide prevention efforts are ongoing. When we become aware of the tragic circumstances of a Veteran suicide, we review the Veteran's client record to try to find ways to improve suicide prevention. The CAF and VAC will continue to work together to improve the strategy as we learn more about suicide and suicide prevention.

Since April 1, 2022, CAF Veterans who apply for a disability benefit for certain mental health conditions – as well as those who had already applied and were awaiting a decision – are automatically qualified for the Mental Health Benefits coverage.

Under the new Mental Health Benefits, CAF Veterans have up to two years of coverage for treatment for conditions such as anxiety and depressive disorders, or trauma-and-stressor-related disorders.

BACKGROUND – NOVA SCOTIA INQUIRY

On January 31, 2023, Judge Scovil released the final report. The report included 25 recommendations that covered areas of information sharing of health records, VAC's case management services, firearm protocol along with reviewing supports for Intimate Partner Violence.

A significant focus on the Inquiry was to determine what changes, if any, needed to be made across multiple jurisdiction. VAC has cooperated fully with the Inquiry and shared all relevant information as required by the terms of reference.

After the incident, VAC conducted an internal file review. Key recommendations were identified from this file review, which lead to implementing changes in with our case management services, expanding and working with CAF on transition services and ensuring that our case management and front line staff is equipped to deal with situations of domestic violence and trauma informed training.

redacted. VAC does not have authorities in our programs or services that allow us to assist in obtaining new housing.

Timeline

On January 2, 2017, Lionel Desmond, a Veteran of the war in Afghanistan, purchased a firearm with ammunition and shot his wife, their 10 year old daughter and his mother. Mr. Desmond then took his own life.

On December 28, 2017, the NS Chief Medical Examiner recommended to the NS Attorney General and Minister of Justice that an inquiry be held into the deaths of Lionel Desmond and his family under Nova Scotia's *Fatality Investigations Act*.

In late 2017, the Minister of Veterans Affairs committed to supporting the Inquiry through the provision of information.

On May 24, 2018, the Order establishing the Inquiry and setting out the Terms of Reference was released.

On June 20, 2019, the Attorney General of Canada (AGC) was granted standing to participate, representing Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), Public Safety Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and Health Canada.

Hearings began in NS January 27, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the hearing schedule was interrupted at various times in order to respect provincial public health orders.

Closing arguments were presented on April 19 and 20, 2022. Concerned parties presented their recommendations, for consideration in the writing of the report.

Between January 27, 2020 and April 20, 2022, the Inquiry sat for 54 days and heard testimonies from 72 witnesses.

Witnesses included family members and friends, numerous health care providers, the RCMP, the Nova Scotia Medical Examiner's Office, provincial firearms' officials, various experts (namely on domestic violence), VAC witnesses and others.

On June 30, 2023, Premier Tim Houstin decided Zimmer was taking too long to complete his final report and was later replaced by provincial court Judge Paul Scovil.

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