

WOMEN VETERANS

- On June 12, 2024, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs released their report: *Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans*.
- The report makes 42 recommendations to address the needs and concerns that Canadian military women and women Veterans face in their physical health, mental health, financial security, and in their transition from military service to civilian life.
- The findings and recommendations from this study reflect the many things Veterans Affairs Canada has heard from our work with women, including at the most recent Women Veterans Forum held in March 2024.
- The call for applications for the Women Veterans Council was released on June 10, 2024. The Council, made up of serving women and Veterans of the CAF and the RCMP, will work with Veterans Affairs Canada and the Minister to address the inequities and barriers women face. The selection process has completed, names of successful applicants will be announced shortly.

- Our government is committed to ensuring that the growing role of women in the CAF and the Veteran community is fully recognized; that women are well supported throughout their military careers including their transition out of the military to civilian life; and that women have equity in accessing VAC's programs and services.
- A key priority is to recognize the impacts of gender and sexual identity on the military and Veteran experience, and ensure that Veterans are not experiencing inequities in systems, policies, programs, services and commemorations.

WHEN PRESSED:

Q1 – What progress has VAC made on addressing the recommendations of the ACVA report: *Invisible No More*?

Veterans Affairs Canada in partnership with the Canadian Armed Forces and other federal Departments are working to address each of the 42 recommendations within the report. Early progress has been made on the several recommendations from the Committee related to the need for increased women-specific research. Specifically, there are studies currently in progress on Canadian Women Experiencing Homelessness; survey analysis on the Well-being of Women Veterans; and Exploring the Biopsychosocial Impacts of Pelvic Health Issues for Women Veterans just to name a few. Veterans Affairs Canada will make the findings and others available on their website and tie these research findings back to tangible outcomes and changes to improve the support to women. Veterans Affairs Canada also has a Women-specific research plan which they will be bringing forward to the soon to be established Women Veterans Council for them to provide advice and input on the areas of focus needed when it comes to women research.

Several recommendations relate to Veteran homelessness. VAC is currently working in close collaboration with federal partners on the continued implementation of the Veteran Homelessness Program. This five-year program will provide \$79.1 million in funding directly to third-party organizations to provide rent supplements and wrap-around services.

Several recommendations relate to improved GBA+ analysis in addressing any inequities for women in accessing VAC benefits – VAC's work in modernizing the Table of Disabilities and updating its Entitlement Eligibility Guidelines is already addressing inequities in accessing VAC benefits. For example, to meet the specific needs of women Veterans, VAC has approved a number of non-prescription, over the counter products as first-line therapy for genitourinary syndrome of menopause and initial treatment measures for female sexual dysfunction. In 2024, VAC expedited release of an updated chapter of the TOD specifically addressing Urinary, Sexual, Reproductive and Breast Impairment and in early 2025, new Guidelines will be issued related to improved and equitable support to women.

Q2 – What is VAC doing to better understand the challenges facing Women Veterans with regard to their physical health, mental health and safety concerns?

Since 2019, the team dedicated to addressing Women Veterans' priorities has worked collaboratively with Veterans, key stakeholders, subject matter experts, and other government departments to help identify and address systemic issues specific to sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation of underrepresented groups within the Veteran population.

In March 2024, the Department hosted the 2024 Women Veterans Forum for 99 individuals who attended in person; 88 of those were women Veterans. Another 70 individuals participated online.

The two-day event was filled with panel discussions on topics identified by the community, such as women's veteran homelessness, recognition, transition, and health. VAC will take the information and feedback gathered at the Forum to elevate the lived experiences of Women Veterans to strengthen the understanding of the unique challenges facing Women Veterans regarding their physical health and mental health.

VAC also hosted a roundtable on Women Veterans Homelessness in November 2023 with community partners, academics, and Veterans. Additionally, VAC hosted women Veterans for a series of planning sessions as we explored the establishment of a Women Veterans Council. In December 2023, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA) completed the sitting sessions as part of its comprehensive study on the experience of women Veterans, which VAC was actively engaged in.

Q3 – Is VAC aware of the experiences of Women Veterans with regard to their transition to civilian life and the supports they might require?

VAC continues to work towards implementing more inclusive transition services for women Veterans. We understand through longitudinal research that while many Veterans make a smooth transition from military to civilian life, women Veterans may face more challenges as they are more likely to be medically released, single, lone parents, or providing care for others which can make transition difficult. Women also face a steeper income decline after leaving the Canadian Armed Forces. VAC also continues to be an active collaborator with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Department of National Defence (DND) to improve the social, health, and economic outcomes of women Veteran communities. For example, VAC and DND/CAF are exploring opportunities to align priorities and collaborate across departments on research to support women Veterans health and wellness.

Q4 – Is VAC aware of the experiences of Women Veterans who have experienced sexual trauma during service?

VAC is aware that women Veterans are more likely than other groups of Veterans to report experiencing sexual trauma, and continues to engage in ongoing and targeted outreach, engagement, and research with women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veteran stakeholder groups, and is an active member of internal and external committees while supporting the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence to understand and address the experiences of women Veterans. Throughout the ACVA study on the experience of women, VAC actively observed and participated in the hearings, taking note of the meaningful testimony heard at the Committee.

Q5 – Is VAC aware of the unique needs of Women Veterans facing homelessness or housing instability?

VAC worked collaboratively with Infrastructure Canada on the implementation of the Veteran Homelessness Program to financially support community organizations in providing services and rent supplements to Veterans experiencing homelessness. VAC continues to expand its understanding of the unique needs of women Veterans and has overseen a scoping literature review on female Veterans who are at risk homelessness. Additionally, VAC hosted a roundtable on Women Veterans Homelessness in November 2023 with community partners, academics, and women Veterans to better understand the grassroots work being done in the community and the factors that contribute to women Veterans homelessness.

Q6 – What is VAC doing to improve the programs and supports for women Veterans?

In September 2021, VAC added a team dedicated to processing disability benefits claims from female applicants/Veterans. This team is working to ensure we can systematically address the current barriers and close the gap in processing times for female and male applicants. In 2022-2023, the Veteran and Family Wellbeing Fund sponsored four projects with missions directly affecting the women Veterans community.

To support the Department's work in modernizing the Table of Disabilities, in January 2022, VAC issued a new Entitlement Eligibility Guideline- Sexual Dysfunction. To meet the specific needs of women Veterans, VAC has approved a number of non-prescription, over the counter products as first-line therapy for genitourinary syndrome of menopause and initial treatment measures for female sexual dysfunction.

The Department is currently in the process of reviewing the chapters of the Table of Disabilities to ensure that the needs of women and gender diverse Veterans are considered from an equity and inclusive perspective.

VAC has also continued efforts to make inclusive disability benefits decisions by developing and implementing a new Sexual Dysfunction Entitlement Eligibility Guideline (EEG) to support decision making for females, males and clients who identify as gender diverse, including those who have experienced sexual trauma related to service. This work includes applying Gender-Based Analysis Plus to ensure that tools provide evidence-based decisions considering the diverse health-related experience of CAF members and Veterans.

VAC continues to integrate the work of Gender-Based Analysis Plus into the work of the department and promote inclusion for all Veterans by recognizing the different impacts of policies, programs and services based on gender identity and expression, biological sex and/or sexual orientation, as well as intersecting identity factors, such as age, disability, indigeneity, race/ethnicity, religion, and language. VAC has strengthened Women Veterans

Source: Commemoration and Public Affairs Date: 2024/11/27

training on Gender Based Analysis Plus, and works to ensure that Women Veterans have access to programs and services that correspond with their unique needs.

A Gender-Based Analysis Plus is being applied to current and upcoming Departmental initiatives to ensure all disability benefits applications are treated and processed equitably.

In January 2024, VAC introduced a Women's Health mailbox, a dedicated resource for sharing information and research on women's health.

In March 2024, the Department hosted the 2024 Women Veterans Forum for 99 individuals who attended in person; 88 of those were women Veterans. Another 70 individuals participated online. The Forum focused on the unique lived experiences of women Veterans, where participants had the opportunity to engage with other Veterans and community partners working in areas such as life after service, women's health, homelessness and recognition. The information gathered at the Forum will help the Department gain a broader understanding of women Veterans' lived experiences, and challenges in accessing services. It also created opportunities to VAC senior management to engage in an intimate setting with women Veterans, sharing their stories face-to-face. Many action items were taken away from this event that the Department published in a report this Fall 2024.

BACKGROUND — WOMEN VETERANS

On June 12, 2024, ACVA released their first-ever report devoted entirely to the study of Canadian women Veterans entitled *Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans*. The report makes 42 recommendations, primarily directed to Veterans Affairs Canada (as the lead) and the Department of National Defence, to address the needs and concerns that Canadian military women and women Veterans face in their physical health, mental health, financial security, and in their transition from military to Veteran, from service to civilian life. Women have bodies, experiences and needs that are distinct from men's. Military systems in place were historically designed for men, and women have had to work within a system that potentially causes additional harm, injury and illness. Notwithstanding some recent progress, many women have been left feeling invisible due to the lack of acknowledgment by Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) of women Veterans' concerns and injuries resulting from their service. Due to this lack of acknowledgement and recognition for the unique challenges women face, despite their service, many women Veterans have difficulties even identifying as Veterans. The proposed response agrees with 29 of the recommendations; agrees in principle with 9 of the recommendations; takes note of 3 of the recommendations; and disagrees with 1 of the recommendation (on the advice of the Department of National Defence).

According to the 2021 census, nearly one in six Veterans are women. Women Veterans represent the fastest growing segment of Veterans in Canada.

Women Veterans have distinct lived experiences in the military and have unique needs after service. Women Veterans are more likely to have challenges across all of the seven domains of well being, including difficulty in the transition to civilian life, different reproductive and sexual health challenges and needs, barriers accessing services, and reluctance to identify as a Veteran.

Despite the increasing integration of women into the CAF in recent years, many women as well as gender and sexually diverse military members face a hostile culture, as noted in the 2015 independent external review on sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in the CAF.

VAC has acknowledged that many challenges for Women Veterans remain, and has begun to address the issue of gaps in data and research challenges. VAC has formally adopted Sex and Gender Equity in Research (SAGER) guidelines to ensure VAC's research systematically applies sex and gender considerations through all the phases of research. VAC is also collaborating with McMaster University and It's Not Just 20,000 (INJ20K) to assess the impact on both military sexual trauma survivors and institutions when engaging in leadership-level conversations about Sexual Misconduct and Military Sexual Trauma. VAC is working with Statistics Canada to develop a more complete picture of the demographic characteristics and socioeconomic outcomes of Canadian Veterans and their families by linking census data with other government programs.

Women Veterans

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This will result in a better understanding of specific Veteran populations including women, 2SLGBTQI+, Indigenous, and other underrepresented groups.

In 2023, Veterans Affairs Canada hosted the Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans Forum, on February 9th and February 16th. The intent of the Forum was to continue to provide an opportunity for VAC to focus on the experiences of underrepresented Veterans and encourage conversations and linkages with stakeholders that respond to the needs of women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans. This Women and 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans Forum built on the 2019 Women Veterans' Forum, the 2022 Women Veterans Virtual Series, and the 2022 LGBTQ2 Veterans' Roundtable. VAC hosted a roundtable on Women Veterans Homelessness in November 2023 with community partners, academics, and women Veterans to better understand the grassroots work being done in the community and the factors that contribute to women Veterans homelessness. During this time, VAC also met with women Veterans for a series of planning sessions as we explore the establishment of a Women Veterans Council.

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