



Veterans Affairs
Canada

Deputy Minister

P.O. Box 7700
Charlottetown, P.E.I.
C1A 8M9

Anciens Combattants
Canada

Sous-ministre

C.P. 7700
Charlottetown (Î.-P.-É.)
C1A 8M9

Honourable Darren Fisher
Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence
66 Slater Street
Ottawa, ON

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the entire Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) team, I would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence. As your Deputy Minister, I look forward to working with you to advance our important mandate of supporting Canada's Veterans and recognizing their service to our country.

Our main focus is delivering service and improving support programs we provide to Canadian Veterans and their families. Specifically, improving the processing time for disability benefits remains our top priority and the most significant issue traditionally identified by the Veteran community. Temporary investments through recent budgets have allowed us to successfully reduce the backlog of disability benefit applications by over 75% since spring 2020. This has been achieved against demand that has been increasing by 10% each year. We continue to seek additional, permanent investments to resolve the backlog, provide future stability in processing, and develop automation and AI tools that will allow us to further modernize and streamline our processes.

As of September 30, 2024, there were 6246 applications over the 16 week service standard (backlog). This represents a significant decrease from September 2019 when 23,260 applications sat beyond the service standard. We also have successfully bridged significant gaps that existed for applications from women and Francophone Veterans, and now there are virtually no gaps in these categories. We recognize that there is still more to be done. We look forward to working with you in the weeks ahead to discuss our plan to build on recent progress and to secure further critical investments in Budget 2025 to modernize and transform our operations so that Veterans and their families receive timely, high quality and consistent service.

We also provide direct support to Veterans under case management and have built significant expertise in this domain. Over 40,000 Canadians served in uniform in Afghanistan, and greater than 25% of those have a confirmed PTSD diagnosis. At present, 15, 000 Veterans are receiving direct

Canada⁺

case management from 486 professional case managers at VAC, and a further 1644 Veterans are under guided support as they transition from rehabilitation.

Supporting the good mental health of our Veterans is also important. In 2022 the Department put in place a new mental health benefit, to support all Veterans struggling with mental health. This benefit is currently supporting 5490 Veterans so that they are able to get immediate access to care.

Engagement with the Veteran community and working with them on priority issues continues to be paramount. Veterans are represented by a number of organizations and voices and we work directly with all of them. Currently, there are Ministerial Advisory Groups in the areas of mental health, families, care, transition, and commemoration that provide opportunity to assemble views and help develop strategies on priority issues. You will have opportunity to meet with these groups early in 2025. We have equally developed significant efforts with First Nations, Métis and Inuit leadership to co-develop initiatives that ensure recognition of Indigenous service and sacrifice. Additionally, and importantly, last month saw the announcement of the new Women Veterans Council to help coalesce needed work related to women who have served (as well as those currently serving). Twelve accomplished women were named to the inaugural Council and they will have their first formal meeting in January in Ottawa.

Commemoration is another critical aspect of our work. A number of signature events are planned within your first few months as Minister.

Between February 8-16, 2025, the **Invictus Games 2025** will be held in Vancouver/Whistler, BC. As part of the Games, VAC will also be hosting a delegation of Indigenous Veterans who will join us. This will be an excellent opportunity for you to meet the delegation, take part in Opening Ceremonies and cheer on Team Canada at sporting events, meet with your Five Eyes counterparts (USA, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) and leaders from other participating countries.

In early May 2025, we will mark the **80th Anniversary of the Liberation of the Netherlands and Victory in Europe** with a series of events which will carry national and international attention. The programming both in Canada and abroad are opportunities to pay tribute to and honour the service and sacrifices of Canada's fallen and all Veterans who served during the Second World War. It is also an opportunity to connect with modern-day Veterans, notably women and Indigenous Veterans, still-serving CAF members and their families and share their stories and Canada's rich military history. You will lead the Government of Canada's official delegation to the Netherlands and participate in several significant and meaningful ceremonies to mark this important milestone.

This week's 2024 Fall Economic Statement confirmed that the Government of Canada is working with the Last Post Fund, a national non-profit organization who owns and operates Canada's largest domestic Veteran

cemetery, the National Field of Honour (NFOH), situated in Point-Claire, Quebec. The intention is to ensure that the NFOH remains a solemn place of commemoration honouring Canada's veterans.

Finally, the Department has a number of other key priorities, including new initiatives to address Veteran homelessness (with our colleagues at Housing, Infrastructure and Communities) and to advance post-service opportunities through the National Veterans Employment Strategy. We have also made significant strides in advancing on our commitment to diversity and inclusion through more active identification and addressing issues of consequence to under-represented Veteran groups (Women Veterans, Indigenous Veterans, 2SLGBTQI+ Veterans, Black and other racialized Veterans).

We continue to focus on outstanding and ongoing commitments to ensure meaningful supports and recognition are in place for Canada's Veterans and their families. Our steadfast emphasis on service excellence, modern delivery of support, and diverse commemorative activities and strong connection to the Veterans community are at the core of VAC's current work.

Along with a talented and committed group of senior executives, and with a dedicated and professional staff in 70 locations across Canada, I look forward to working with and supporting you as we promote the well-being of Canadian Veterans and their families while recognizing the significant role they and those who served before them have played for our country.

Sincerely,

Paul Ledwell
Deputy Minister