

# Canada and United States Relationship – and other International Relationships

## Issue

The United States of America changed administrations effective January 20, 2025 impacting Canada – US relations.

## Context

- Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USVA) have a long history of collaboration to research and share information to better support and meet the needs of Veterans and their families.
- VAC does not have any lines of business that depends on the US. However, VAC and the USVA work together through a reciprocal agreement (details below).
- Both VAC and USVA participate in the Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee, which is chaired by VAC and involves six working groups conducting international comparisons of available research.
  - USVA is lead on the topic of Veteran suicide.
  - VAC leads the topics of Military exposures and measures of Veteran well-being.
- Senior VAC and USVA officials participate in the Five Eyes Ministerial and Deputy level meetings. Recent items discussed included Homelessness, Employment and Mental Health.
  - The most recent Deputy Heads Five Eyes meeting was held virtually on February 20, 2024. The last in-person Ministerial Five Eyes meeting was held on October 20-21, 2018.
- A Reciprocal agreement between the Veteran administration of the United States and the Department of Veterans Affairs Canada was signed in 1956.
- The purpose of the Agreement was to facilitate access to health care benefits for Canadian Veterans living outside Canada and allied Veterans living in Canada following the Boer War and First and Second World Wars.
- In 2023, there were an estimated 324 Canadian Veteran clients residing in over fifty-six countries worldwide, with the majority living in the US. These clients accessed VAC

approved health care benefits and sought reimbursement of costs through the Department.

- USVA uses presumptive rulings (a Veteran is automatically granted entitlement to a disability benefit or a condition is considered service-related if it is demonstrated to have been incurred during specific military activities, training, or administration, unless evidence to the contrary is presented) for a number of conditions, including the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 (law that expands US VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange and other toxic substance). VAC is currently exploring how to utilize the USVA research to evolve our adjudication processes.

## Key Update

- Effective January 21, 2025, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs has a new Secretary, Doug Collins.
- Secretary Collins is an Air Force Veteran and had served as a legal counsel for President Donald Trump since 2020.
- "The challenges facing the department have evolved in recent years, with a younger generation of veterans bringing new health challenges from their service in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars." "I'm an Iraq War veteran. I understand burn pits because I slept next to one for many months," Doug Collins said in his opening remarks during his confirmation hearing. He said that he understands the challenges facing Veterans today who "went time and time again, deployment after deployment" to conflict zones.
- Secretary Collins reported that when President Trump offered him this job, the instructions were simple: 'take great care of America's Veterans'. Here is how he is going to accomplish the task:
  - Deliver timely access to care and benefits for every eligible Veteran, family member, caregiver and survivor.
  - Put Veterans at the center of everything VA does, focusing relentlessly on customer service and convenience.
  - Challenge the status quo in order to find new and better ways of helping VA beneficiaries.
  - Celebrate the vast majority of VA employees who do a great job every day and hold employees accountable when they fall short of the mission.
  - Provide Veterans with the health care choices they have earned while maintaining and improving VA's direct health care capabilities.

- Do a better job reaching Veterans at risk of homelessness or suicide – especially those who have had no contact with VA.
- USVA is planning a reorganization that includes cutting over 70,000 jobs (including veterans) from the agency that provides health care and other services for millions of veterans. This ‘downsizing’ of the VA administration is already underway. The VA’s Chief of Staff, Christopher Syrek, told top-level officials at the agency that it had an objective to cut enough employees to return to 2019 staffing levels of just under 400,000.

## **Other International Relationships**

### **Ukraine**

- Canada is among Ukraine’s staunchest supporters on the world stage, and our two countries have deep and long-standing bilateral ties. Canada has provided strong support for Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and reform efforts.
- The Government of Canada (Prime Minister Trudeau) signed the Agreement on Security Cooperation between Canada and Ukraine with the Government of Ukraine (President Zelenskyy) in February 2024.
- Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) contributed to this agreement and is responsible for two of the objectives:
  - sharing strategies, standards, frameworks, and best practices for supporting Veterans; and
  - sharing expertise, evidence, and guidance in the implementation of programs and services for Veterans of war and family members.
- A subsequent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was created to support these objectives. The signing of this MoU took place on February 11, 2025 at the 2025 Invictus Games in Vancouver, BC and was signed by the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine.
- Veterans Affairs Canada has established an internal Working Group that is poised to share strategies, frameworks, and best practices for Veterans of war and family members to the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine.
- Veterans Affairs Canada has met with a number of officials from Ukraine over the past number of months to share expertise and discuss how to fully support Ukraine Veterans and their families. Recent engagement (November 2024) with the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs Ukraine along with a meeting with a

Women's delegation from Ukraine, continues the sharing of expertise to help support Ukraine.

- Ukraine has identified Mental Health as one of their top priorities. They formalized an MoU with the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families in September of 2023 which allows cooperation in research, knowledge exchange and capacity- building in the sphere of mental health. The Atlas Institute was established as the Centre of Excellence on PTSD and Related Mental Health Conditions through the Minister of Veterans Affairs' 2015 mandate letter and was renamed the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families in 2022.
- In October of 2024, a Ukrainian delegation came to Canada to spend a half day at the Atlas Institute and Atlas has identified that it has significant opportunities to support the long-term mental health needs in Ukraine. While in Ottawa, the delegation visited:
  - The Mental Health Commission of Canada;
  - The Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre (The Atlas Institute is located at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre); and
  - Red Cross Ottawa.

## **Australia**

- Canada and Australia are like-minded partners across nearly all sectors of the relationship. We work closely in the Five Eyes defence, security and intelligence partnership, and our defence relationship with Australia is our most important in the Asia/Oceania region. Our close links are further strengthened by Canada-Australia-New Zealand (CANZ) co-operation within the United Nations, and joint membership in the Commonwealth.
- Veterans Affairs Canada and the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs work closely together as we actively participate in the Five Eyes group.
- Veterans Affairs Canada and Australia continue to collaborate on areas of mutual interest such as Veteran homelessness and mental health. Within the Veteran community.
- VAC and Australia Veterans Affairs officials met in February during the 2025 Invictus Games in Vancouver, BC. Australia expressed interest in greater collaboration with VAC given our shared priorities and similarity in programs and challenges. Main topics of discussion included fiscal impacts along with increased applications, building trust with the Veteran community, mental health, and Australia wants to continue to build relationships with their defense department to support better outcomes for serving members in the future.

- Both VAC and Australia participate in the Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee, which is chaired by VAC and involves six working groups conducting international comparisons of available research.
  - Australia is lead on the topic of Veteran Demographics.
  - VAC leads the topics of Military exposures and measures of Veteran well-being.

### **United Kingdom**

- Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) have a long standing positive relationship. This relationship continues a long tradition of strategic partnership. Canada and the UK work closely together as we actively participate in the Five Eyes group.
- VAC and the UK continue to collaborate on areas of mutual interest such as Veteran homelessness, employment for Veterans and women Veterans, to name a few.
- UK and VAC officials met in February during the 2025 Invictus Games. Main topics of discussions included Invictus Games (IG 2027 to be held in Birmingham, England). The UK commended VAC on how we commemorate our Veterans. The UK also advised that they have changed their approach to incorporate Veterans employment and women Veterans into a single new strategy that is more outcome based.
- Both VAC and the UK participate in the Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee, which is chaired by VAC and involves six working groups conducting international comparisons of available research.
  - UK is lead on the topic of Veteran Employment.
  - VAC leads the topics of Military exposures and measures of Veteran well-being.

### **New Zealand**

- New Zealand is an important partner for Canada on a broad range of issues, including security and defence, multilateral trade negotiations, regional cooperation, counterterrorism, the environment, peace support operations, Indigenous issues, international fisheries, and oceans governance, education, and culture.
- Veterans Affairs Canada and Veterans' Affairs New Zealand work closely together as we actively participate in the Five Eyes group.
- Both VAC and New Zealand participate in the Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee, which is chaired by VAC and involves six working groups conducting international comparisons of available research.
  - New Zealand is lead on the topic of Public Perceptions.
  - VAC leads the topics of Military exposures and measures of Veteran well-being.

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- There have been no bilateral meetings with New Zealand in recent months. New Zealand officials attended the 2025 Invictus Games in Vancouver, BC, however there were no scheduled meetings with VAC officials.