

NATO VETERANS ORGANIZATION OF CANADA (NVOC)

PRESIDENTS MESSAGE (NOVEMBER 2018)

The Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) hosted a National stakeholder summit in Ottawa on October 29th and 30th. About 140 people attended - mostly veterans. The event was co-moderated by LGen Bowes and Lisa Campbell (a senior executive in VAC). The delegates from the NATO Veterans Organization of Canada were myself, Ted Bransfield and Percy Price. The Royal Canadian Legion, ANAVETS, Peacekeepers, Aboriginal Veterans, the RCMP Association and others were also invited. Several of the "angry" veterans who write and speak critically of VAC were also in attendance. They tend to speak to their own agenda and issues and really do not advance the cause for most veterans Here are my own notes and observations! This is NOT a record of events/discussions!

Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence The Honourable Seamus O'Regan

Opening remarks were focused on the "Pension for Life" initiative. This is the Ministers priority. He is very satisfied with the 45 "Town Halls" that he and the Deputy Minister have hosted this year. (*My Comment: the old Pension Act is finished and done with. The Pension for Life is so far along in the approval process that it can not be stopped. It will come into effect 1 April 2019*). VAC is committed to doing better for those who have served. Change is taking place and the Minister stated that Advisory Groups will be renewed in their current form. More advice will be sought on gender/single member/service couples issues. [*Comment: Good news for veteran advocates. There was a lady military Doctor attending - (I was never sure about her status) but she did raise excellent issues related to women veterans*]. Service delivery standards and "wait times" are a concern - what are realistic standards? His goals are (a) one application - one assessment - one decision. (b) Veterans do not do the work! VAC staff does the work. and (c) Responsive -compassionate and uncomplicated process with guided support. The veteran does have to prove eligibility for disability benefits. There was discussion during break out sessions about Timely versus Accuracy ? An error in a decision requires appeal. Consensus was that a "good" decision - made in a timely fashion and that did not need an appeal was the way to go. Senior staff briefed on:

- Veteran Family Programs;
- Education and Training benefits;
- Veterans Emergency Funds;
- Career Transition Services; and
- Veteran and family well being fund. NOTE: there are Fact sheets about these on the VAC website.

Deputy Minister General (retired) Walt Natynczyk

The DM spoke of life after service studies [about 7500 Reg Force and 2500 Reserves release every year. About 1/3 have some trouble transitioning and most release prior to being entitled to a pension/annuity. *[there are about 640,000 "veterans" and about 110,000 have an annuity [that is veterans and spouses with survivor benefits]*. The combat arms and sea ops trades/classifications are the folks who have the most difficulty - financial security? social issues? housing?. Well being/ having a sense of purpose are important and every veteran has a unique situation. A key factor is to include families. The VAC staff want to be able to tailor transition services for individuals. About 25% of veterans who come to VAC do so while still in uniform; about 25% come to VAC within two years and about 50% come in years two to seven. The Pension for Life will be a "game changer". *(Comment: I am beginning my own application for a disability issue at age 69! Along the lifeline of a veterans progress there are different needs at different times.);'*

Chief of the Defence Staff General "Jon" Vance

The summit held in 2016 had the CDS voice his concerns over "transition". He has implemented the beginnings of massive change for how the CF treats its people inside the Force as they transition out and into civilian life. His primary effort has been to stamp out sexual harassment . He is now focussed on "Transition" and has created a new "CF Transition Group" - there will "Transition Units" and "Transition Centre's [Commander will be BGen Meisner]. Some members (and some members of the family) do not feel comfortable about accessing support on a military Base and there may be a need for off-site offices? The Director Transition Services, Col Kevin Cameron (Infantry) was in attendance during the entire summit. Expertise in treating members better will take time to develop and the CDS intends to pay for CMP [Chief of Military Personnel] first - and then address needs of the services! "People first- Mission always" is new buzz phrase Transition "Out" is as important now as is Transition "In". About 25% of "releases are medical. The CF and VAC have exchanged senior staff [Director levels] to give a more "seamless" coordination.

Mental Health

Much research is ongoing here at home and with our close allies [US of A; UK. Australia/New Zealand]. One survey was 3000 Canadian veterans [by telephone] and 1/3 had some "issues"(low rank? low income? health?). Only 1/7th of veterans are clients of VAC. Risk of suicide for veteran males is 1.4 times higher than the national general population. Risk of suicide for veteran females is 1.8 times higher than the national general population. Veteran males over 50 have a lower suicide risk than the general population. This statistic is consistent over 37 years of study and is not an Afghanistan phenomena. The Royal Ottawa Hospital is the centre of excellence in research for mental health and PTSD of veterans.

PTSD is both a mental and physical disease with lots of pain. PTSD can be treated and much more needs to be learned.

- **Service Dogs** There were several service dogs at the summit and after day one two people with service dogs were refused service by several Taxi cabs. Made a real point for the rest of us.
- **Caregiver Benefit** At the end of Day 1 a very eloquent lady stood and told her own story. She is a nurse and a young mother with a husband suffering from PTSD. She spoke very well - there were some in the room with tears listening. She had applied for the Caregiver Benefit and was denied. The next morning the Minister stood and talked about her case - she was in the room. He told the audience that he was disturbed -the Benefit is "recognition" and to be denied is "rejection". That is not what he wants to happen. [*COMMENT: There will be a hard look at this benefit and I anticipate change that will benefit the caregiver ! I.E. less stringent criteria to be eligible.*]

Veterans and Homelessness

"One homeless veteran is one too many". There are between 5,000 and 7,000 veterans who are living rough on the streets [or in tents in the bush]. The intent is to create a national network of support and emergency health care professionals for homeless veterans. There are success stories across the nation in finding and assisting veterans in getting shelter and access to safe living conditions, Much discussion. About 5% of Canada's homeless are veterans [the vast majority of national homeless are Indigenous] and the idea is to help and to graduate people into self sufficiency. Large "warehousing" ideas do not work - the idea of "small houses" has considerable potential. The homeless veteran is a medical issue and is not just a bad choice or poverty. Homelessness is a Medical issue - addictions? mental health? undiagnosed disabilities? brain injuries (self medicating).

Communications

Communications is always something that can be improved. The VAC staff briefed on work they are doing now to better improve information passage - including better and easier to use website structure and access. They have some clever people working hard to improve their communication with us in the Veteran community.

One possible improvement in the conduct of Summits would be to list speakers names and appointments. There was a Parliamentary Secretary speaking about homeless veterans who really was impressive with his depth of knowledge and understanding. Don't know who he was?

The Summit was productive and provided most participants with information and ideas to work on. There are always new "phrase's: - one that I liked was "*this will be wave top overviews*" [In my day it was "*the Coles notes version*". I enjoyed meeting a Master Gunner from my own service - he is working "Helmets to Hardhats" (something that I knew very little about!). Lots of good people working in support of veterans.

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