

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg, MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs  
131 Queen Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
House of Commons  
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. Dubourg:

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, I am pleased to provide a Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs' first report entitled, *Moving Towards Ending Homelessness Among Veterans*, which will be tabled in the House of Commons. The recommendations have been grouped together into themes to provide a more comprehensive, holistic response. This response illustrates the progress made to tackle Veteran homelessness and the consultation and research that have and will continue to lead to an increased understanding of the population of Veterans experiencing homelessness and the challenges and barriers they may face.

I value the findings and observations included in your report. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and the members of the Standing Committee for your work and dedication towards finding solutions to the challenges our Veterans face.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lawrence MacAulay". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, PC, MP

Enclosure: 1

c.c.: Cédric Taquet, Clerk, Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

## **Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs First Report *Moving Towards Ending Homelessness Among Veterans***

The Government of Canada (Government) welcomes the opportunity to respond to recommendations made in the first report of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA). The Government would like to thank both ACVA for this report, as well as the witnesses who appeared before the Committee.

The Government is continuing its efforts to ensure that the needs of Veterans experiencing and at risk of homelessness are addressed. Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) is committed to taking a whole of Government approach to ensuring all Canadians, including Veterans, have better access to safe, stable, and affordable housing.

The Government acknowledges the Committee's recommendations and notes that the main recommendation of the report, that "it should be possible to implement a program that eliminates Veterans' homelessness" is consistent with previous Government commitments, as noted in the Speech from the Throne in 2019, 2020, and 2021, to eliminate chronic homelessness in Canada and, in particular, to helping ensure that every Veteran has a place to call home. The Government is advancing initiatives supporting most of the Committee's recommendations and continues to engage key partners at the federal level, and in provinces, territories and communities to continue to improve the measures and services for Veterans experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness. As noted in the report's conclusion, the Government agrees that homelessness is a complex issue for which the solution requires numerous, coordinated interventions.

The Government is pleased to provide a themed response to the Committee's recommendations, which are aligned with the significant efforts that have already been made, and that continue to be made, by the Government to address homelessness, including Veteran homelessness and housing.

### **A. Partnering – Working together to end Veteran homelessness in Canada**

#### **Committee Recommendation 1**

That VAC work in partnership with community agencies dedicated to helping Veterans and establish ways for continual contact between the Department and Veterans, with the latter's permission.

#### **Committee Recommendation 4**

That VAC continues, in partnership with other federal, provincial/territorial and municipal organizations concerned, and with the community agencies dedicated to helping Veterans in need, to implement action plans such as the National Housing Strategy to eradicate homelessness among Veterans.

#### **Committee Recommendation 8**

That VAC, in partnership with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, ensures that housing projects for Veterans who are homeless receive specific targeted funding under the National Housing Strategy.

## **Government Response**

VAC recognizes that working in partnership with community organizations, Veteran stakeholders, other levels of government, and other federal government departments and agencies is key to addressing Veteran homelessness. VAC offices throughout the country continue outreach efforts, including providing recently updated material, to engage and support Veterans experiencing homelessness and Veterans in crisis with the aim of preventing homelessness.

In April 2018, VAC implemented the Veteran and Family Well-Being Fund (VFWBF), a grants and contributions program that focuses on innovative ways to support the well-being of Veterans and their families. This program provides funding to eligible organizations to conduct research and implement innovative initiatives and projects that support the well-being of Veterans and their families. Leveraging the knowledge and expertise of organizations working with the Veteran population and sub-populations enhances research, best practices and innovative solutions to best support Veterans and their families. The Fund supports projects in a number of sectors, including those related to Veteran homelessness, employment and mental health. It also supports organizations working with underserved groups such as women, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two-spirit (LGBTQ2), Indigenous, and racialized Veterans and helps develop, disseminate, promote and share this knowledge to better serve Veterans and their families.

Budget 2021 announced an additional \$15 million over three years, starting in 2021-22, for VAC to expand and enhance the VFWBF for projects that will support Veterans during the post COVID-19 recovery, including addressing homelessness, employment, retraining and health challenges. As of March 2022, VAC has announced 102 recipients for a total of \$36.3 million since the introduction of this program in 2018. Over \$8.5 million of these funds have been allocated to 23 projects in support of Veterans who are experiencing homelessness or in crisis. One of these recipients, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, was provided \$1,154,081 over six years (until 2025) to pilot and scale a community-based approach to end Veteran homelessness. Their Built for Zero Canada strategy has proven successful in Canadian cities like London, Ontario, where they have reported that they have reached functional zero for Veteran homelessness. Similarly, VAC supported VETS Canada's Equal Treatment for All program, which focuses on Indigenous, women, and LGBTQ2 Veterans and their families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness or otherwise in crisis. Funding projects such as these is instrumental to ensuring a holistic, intersectional response to the risks and challenges that Veterans face.

As announced during Veterans Week 2020, VAC has also collaborated with The Royal Canadian Legion's (RCL) expansion of the "Leave the Streets Behind" Program to include the Toronto Police Services (TPS) and Ontario Provincial Police (OPP). The TPS and the OPP have adopted this program, which has been renamed as the Military Veteran Wellness Program. The program is a collaboration between the TPS, OPP, RCL, VAC, and the Operational Stress Injury Social Support network. It provides frontline workers training and tools to connect Veterans in crisis with support partners, namely the RCL, VAC and the Operational Stress Injury Social Support

network. Current efforts are focused on opportunities to expand the program to include Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) involvement.

Budget 2021 announced \$44.6 million over two years, beginning in 2022-23 to “pilot a program aimed at reducing Veteran homelessness through the provision of rent supplements and wrap-around services for Veterans experiencing homelessness such as counselling, addiction treatment, and help finding a job.” To ensure long-term support is in place, Budget 2022 proposed to move directly to the launch of a targeted program with an investment of \$62.2 million over three years, beginning in 2024-25. This brings total funding available for the new program to \$106.8 million over five years. Infrastructure Canada (INFC), in close collaboration with VAC and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), is currently working to launch a Veteran Homelessness Program to provide Veterans experiencing homelessness with rent supplements and wrap-around service.

Canada’s National Housing Strategy is investing more than \$72 billion over 10 years to build stronger communities and help Canadians across the country access a safe, stable, and affordable home. The strategy prioritizes the housing needs of the most vulnerable populations in Canada, including Veterans, by building new affordable housing, renewing and repairing existing housing stock and protecting housing affordability across the entire housing continuum. This is done in partnership with Provinces, Territories and Municipalities. Veterans can benefit from many federally-delivered National Housing Strategy initiatives, including the National Housing Co-Investment Fund, the Rental Construction Financing Initiative, the Affordable Housing Innovation Fund, the Rapid Housing Initiative, and the Federal Lands Initiative. As of December 2021, CMHC has committed funding for approximately 80 units specifically reserved for Veterans under the National Housing Strategy.

A key part of the National Housing Strategy is *Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy*, a community-based program that supports communities in addressing the needs of those who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, including Veterans. Launched in 2019, Reaching Home received an initial investment of \$2.1 billion over 9 years (2019-20 to 2027-28). To support the sector’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada’s COVID-19 Economic Response Plan invested an additional \$394.2 million. The Fall Economic Statement 2020 and Budget 2021 provided an additional \$866.6 million for fiscal years 2021-22 to 2023-24. Budget 2022 announced a further investment of \$562 million for Reaching Home over two years, starting in 2024-25, to provide longer-term certainty to on-the-ground community organizations to support their work in preventing and reducing homelessness. Overall, the Government has invested almost \$4 billion in Reaching Home to date. The program prioritizes coordinated service delivery for individuals and families experiencing and at risk of homelessness, and requires communities to develop comprehensive data systems to enable better decision-making. The program is under the responsibility of the Homelessness Policy Directorate, which was transferred from Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to INFC through an October 2021 Order in Council.

### **Committee Recommendation 7**

That VAC and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) sign a memorandum of understanding to make RCMP Veterans eligible for the Veterans Emergency Fund under the

same terms and conditions as Canadian Armed Forces Veterans.

The Veterans Emergency Fund (VEF) was created in 2017. Through this program, VAC provides prompt monetary assistance to eligible CAF Veterans, their survivors and family members in cases where they are facing an immediate financial crisis that threatens their health and well-being. Funds may be provided to alleviate an immediate crisis and ensure that basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing are met. The program was introduced to ensure VAC's ability to respond to the immediate needs of vulnerable CAF Veterans while longer-term solutions, including the determination of eligibility for other VAC programs, were established.

For more than 60 years VAC has partnered with the RCMP to help serving and retired members, as well as regular and civilian members of the RCMP and their families. VAC supports RCMP Veterans with many services, such as transition interviews, case management services, and the VAC Assistance Service. VAC also administers disability pension and treatment benefits to former RCMP members on behalf of the RCMP for service-related injury or illness. The VAC-Department of National Defence network of 11 Operational Stress Injury Clinics/Operational Trauma Stress and Support Centres is also accessible for still-serving and former RCMP members and their families. Similarly, the RCMP Support for Operational Stress Injury (SOSI) program is offered to both active and retired members.

In terms of financial assistance, active and former RCMP members, and their families in need of financial assistance have access to the Fonds fiduciaire Maintiens Le Droit Trust Fund; a registered charity run by the RCMP Veterans Association Foundation. This charity provides a limited finite amount of funding to assist with financial distress through the provision of financial support to current or former RCMP members or employees and/or their immediate families. VAC and the RCMP continue to work closely to monitor the current partnership and identify future opportunities for collaboration.

Currently, the Order in Council that provides the authority for VEF restricts eligibility to military populations, including Veterans of the CAF (War Service and Modern Day), their partners, survivors, and orphans. As such, eligibility for the VEF cannot be expanded through a Memorandum of Understanding between VAC and the RCMP.

## **B. Programs and Services – Extending a helping hand**

### **Committee Recommendation 5**

That VAC and the Department of National Defence ensure that Veterans receive confirmation of their service within a reasonable length of time.

### **Committee Recommendation 6**

That VAC ensures the section of its website concerning homelessness among Veterans is updated regularly and offers the most recent information available.

### **Committee Recommendation 9**

That the Government create a rent supplement for Veterans who are homeless and that this supplement be part of its overall strategy to address homelessness among Veterans.

### **Committee Recommendation 10**

That the Government ensures that initiatives dedicated to Veterans under the National Housing Strategy are open to Veterans with service dogs.

### **Government Response**

Since 2018, VAC staff have direct access to the Department of National Defence (DND) Canadian Forces Health Information System (CFHIS), which maintains information on current and recent military service within the Government of Canada privacy requirements. As such, VAC is able to validate service with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) within two business days and strives to validate non-urgent requests within five business days. In circumstances where VAC must obtain service information for released members not maintained in DND's system, a request must be made to Library and Archives Canada to obtain information contained in paper records. The RCMP is currently investigating ways to verify service of its former members so the necessary programs can be provided. VAC continues to work to ensure that validation of military or RCMP service is not a barrier to timely access to services and benefits.

Veterans who do not receive services and benefits through VAC can be identified by their Veterans' Service Card, launched in September 2018, which provides a tangible symbol of recognition for former members, and encourages an enduring affiliation with the CAF. Additionally, there are designated points of contact in each of VAC's area offices for Veteran homelessness. There is regular engagement between these contacts and community providers, which supports timely identification of Veterans within the population experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

In February 2019, VAC launched a new and improved website, the design and structure of which was user-tested by the Veteran community across Canada. It contains a dedicated section to Veteran Homelessness, including an interactive map of organizations across Canada—whether federal, provincial or community-based organizations—that offer support to Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Organizations that provide services and support to Veterans experiencing homelessness can request their organization be included on the map. The website also features a video entitled *Back in Step*, which addresses the challenges Veterans face when transitioning from military or RCMP service, specifically homelessness. It aims to assist Police and First Responders help identify and support Veterans experiencing homelessness and provides information about the programs and services offered by VAC. The RCMP has also committed to funding the translation of these materials in both official languages; they are made available through the Canadian Police Knowledge Network. Updates to VAC's outreach tools and materials are ongoing, including resources with a Gender Based Analysis (GBA) Plus focus.

The Government, through CMHC, co-developed with provinces and territories a direct to household support initiative—the Canada Housing Benefit—that enables recipients to better afford housing. Co-development took place via bilateral discussions and aligned with the multilateral housing partnership framework agreement, which was endorsed by all provinces and territories except Quebec. Launched in 2020, the Canada Housing Benefit is a \$2 billion federal investment over eight years that is cost-matched and administered by the provinces and

territories. Under the Canada Housing Benefit, Alberta, British Columbia, and Newfoundland prioritize both Veterans and persons experiencing homelessness in their action plans, while Ontario, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, and Prince Edward Island prioritize persons experiencing homelessness.

In addition, Budget 2021 provided Infrastructure Canada (INFC) \$44.6 million, beginning in 2022-23, for a two-year pilot program aimed at reducing Veteran homelessness through rent supplements and wrap-around services (e.g., counselling, addiction treatment, help finding a job). To ensure that long-term support is in place, Budget 2022 proposed to move directly to the launch of a targeted program with an investment of \$62.2 million over three years. Together this provides \$106.8 million over five years for the program. INFC, with support from VAC and CMHC, is currently working to launch a new Veteran Homelessness Program that provides Veterans experiencing homelessness with rent supplements and wrap-around service. Building upon these commitments, INFC, VAC and CMHC are collaborating on the Government's commitment to end chronic homelessness among Veterans through initiatives such as CMHC's Rapid Housing Initiative and the National Housing Co-Investment Fund. In addition, VAC's VEF is available to support Veterans and their families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Any initiative, including those under the National Housing Strategy, will consider the needs of Veterans with service dogs. Should Veteran-specific initiatives be developed and launched, VAC will work within local and regional regulations to facilitate the accommodation of Veterans with service dogs.

### **C. Research and Evidence – Laying the foundation**

#### **Committee Recommendation 2**

That VAC notes the various signs of Veterans who may be at risk of homelessness and proactively engage with them to prevent homelessness.

#### **Committee Recommendation 3**

That VAC, in cooperation with Employment and Social Development Canada and organizations supporting academic research, continues its efforts to better understand Veterans' homelessness, taking into account the overrepresentation of women and Indigenous peoples.

#### **Government response**

Staff members in VAC's 38 local area offices across the country work with Veterans experiencing homelessness, local homeless-sector organizations, other service providers, and community services. In some cases, Veterans who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness self-identify to VAC and seek assistance. Often VAC get referrals from external organizations like shelters, or from partners like the RCL or VETS Canada that come into contact with a Veteran experiencing homelessness and then refer to VAC. VAC staff members are strengthening partnerships across Canada, coordinating efforts to rapidly identify and assist Veterans experiencing homelessness.

For example, VAC has been working closely with the Toronto Police Service, Ontario Provincial Police and the RCMP on the Military Veteran Wellness Program. This initiative involves referral to VAC for follow-up and screening regarding potential benefits and services to address unmet needs when any police officer comes into contact with a Veteran, particularly those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. When a Veteran is considered to be at risk, a case manager is engaged. VAC utilizes a screening tool, which is evidence-based and provides objective data on unmet needs and risks associated with many of the domains of well-being including homelessness, so that Veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness are identified sooner. In addition, the Military to Civilian Transition process currently being phased in at Transition Centres across Canada will help ensure that any gaps or unmet needs are identified prior to release.

Work is underway to develop a whole-of-government approach—informed by strengthened data—to coordinate efforts and address homelessness. Infrastructure Canada (INFC) is engaged in ongoing collaboration with stakeholders to advance the understanding of homelessness in Canada, including Veterans' homelessness. For example, a Homelessness Data Advisory Committee has been created to advise on the development of a National Data Strategy and opportunities to improve data collection, identify and address data gaps, and support data integrity and literacy within communities.

In 2015, as a result of the collaboration between VAC and the Homelessness Policy Directorate, a Veteran identifier question was added to the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System, the national shelter data collection system. The national Point-in-Time counts also measure the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness on a specific day. These counts aim to include not only individuals in shelters, but those in unsheltered and other locations. Sixty-one communities participated in the second coordinated Point-in-Time count in 2018. During this count, 4.4% of the nearly 20,000 survey respondents indicated that they had served in the CAF. National-level findings for counts that took place between 2020 and 2022 are expected to be available in summer 2023.

In 2015, ESDC published *The Extent and Nature of Veteran Homelessness in Canada*, which identified 2.7% of shelter users (2,250 individuals) as Veterans. Additional information on Veterans' shelter use in Canada is available in the National Shelter Study (NSS), a national analysis using emergency shelter data to estimate the number of individuals using homeless shelters each year. The most recent NSS updated the data to 2018. The study found that 1.8% of shelter users served in the military or the RCMP, which translates to approximately 1,200 individuals. This rate is consistent with the estimated percentage of Veterans in the total population in Canada (1.85%). This is a reduction from 2.3% in 2014, when data on Veterans was first collected. Male shelter users were more likely to be Veterans than female shelter users (2.1% vs. 1.0%). Veterans also tended to be older compared to non-Veterans. The average age of a Veteran shelter user was 48 years of age, compared to 39 for non-veteran shelter users. Results for the NSS 2005-2019 are expected to be released in summer 2022.

VAC is committed to doing its part to ensure a broad understanding of its program and service offerings, including providing program information in the most commonly used Indigenous

languages. In the interest of sharing information with Indigenous communities, VAC has translated promotional materials into Indigenous languages, including Inuktitut and Dene.

The Research Directorate within VAC conducts and supports research projects, monitors and interprets international research, provides methodological expertise to help guide strategic decisions and engages in knowledge transfer and exchange both within VAC and with numerous other partners and stakeholders. VAC works closely with INFC's Homelessness Policy Directorate to understand and address Veteran homelessness, taking into account the specific needs of Indigenous peoples and women. INFC provides depersonalized shelter data that is used as part of VAC's well-being surveillance framework. The Veteran identifier question in the Statistics Canada 2021 Census will also provide valuable information on Veterans' well-being at a population level.

In 2019, VAC launched the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans, which has departmental functional responsibility for GBA Plus and shared responsibility to implement VAC's GBA Plus Strategy. One of its principal aims is to encourage the collection of disaggregated data (e.g., by gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability, as well as language and other identity factors) and the application of GBA Plus analytical processes to improve equitable decision-making for the benefit of Veterans and their families. Marginalized groups disproportionately experience homelessness; improved access to disaggregated data and research will enhance understanding and ability to meet the needs of underrepresented Veterans including, but not limited to, women, LGBTQ2, racialized and Indigenous Veterans.

VAC hosted a Women Veterans Forum on May 23, 2019, in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. Bringing together Veterans, active members of the CAF and the RCMP, subject matter experts, ministerial advisory group members, community leaders and government agencies, this forum was designed to facilitate meaningful discussions about challenges women Veterans may face, including homelessness. Since that time, VAC hosted the 2020 Virtual Series, four online, recorded events that included a roundtable with Veterans and stakeholders from the LGBTQ2 community as well as the Women Veterans Forum Update. This virtual series provided members of these communities with opportunities to share experiences and perspectives with VAC, the Department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE), and CAF/DND senior officials. Over the course of the forum and in follow-up Q&As, VAC continued to engage in discussions on the unique challenges facing women and LGBTQ2 Veterans at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Forum participants shared their experiences and perspectives on the systemic barriers in accessing relevant services – including a lack of disaggregated data on Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans, the lack of research on the experiences of female Veterans (including female Veterans experiencing homelessness), as well as the need for trauma-sensitive training for VAC staff members. The perspectives shared through this process provide important information about how programs, policies and practices are shaping the lives of those impacted.

In 2022, VAC developed the Women Veterans Research Plan, leveraging GBA Plus analysis to ensure that representation of marginalized groups is included in research efforts going forward. This includes an element about women Veterans who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness.

To inform the development of *Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy*, the Government of Canada initiated various consultation and engagement processes. It consulted with stakeholders, provinces, territories, Indigenous partners, and people with lived experience of homelessness on how to modernize programming to better prevent and reduce homelessness across Canada. These consultations were guided by the work of an Advisory Committee on Homelessness chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development (Housing and Urban Affairs) that included 13 experts from across the country representing regional, cultural and linguistic duality as well as those with lived experience of homelessness. The Advisory Committee on Homelessness held 10 roundtables across the country in both official languages. In addition to roundtables, the Advisory Committee participated in site visits with local service providers to talk to frontline workers and their clients on how the Government might better support local efforts to address homelessness. As well, between July and September 2017, ideas and suggestions from all Canadians on how to prevent and reduce homelessness in Canada was sought via an online survey.

The findings from these consultations were published in both the Advisory Committee on Homelessness' Final Report and in the Homelessness Partnering Strategy What We Heard Report, which were publicly released on May 18, 2018.

Since the launch of *Reaching Home* in 2019, the Government of Canada has continued to engage regularly with key stakeholders and partners, including Veteran- and homeless-serving organizations, communities and funding recipients, national and regional organizations from the housing and homelessness sector, Indigenous organizations and leaders, provinces and territories, and people with lived experience of homelessness. During the March 2022 roundtables hosted by the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion, views and ideas on how the Government of Canada can best lead efforts to end Veteran homelessness were gathered. Proactive engagements such as these inform the development of and changes to federal homelessness policy design and programming on an ongoing basis and provide an opportunity for those with lived experience to provide meaningful input.

Most recently, Budget 2022 proposed to provide \$18.1 million over three years, beginning in 2022-23, to INFC to conduct research about what further measures could contribute to eliminating chronic homelessness, including among Veterans. This project will provide crucial evidence to inform decision-making on homelessness policy and programming.