

Ombudsman says bureaucrats blocking initiatives to help vets

By David Pugliese, Postmedia News July 23, 2010



Veterans Ombudsman, Col. Pat Stogran (Retired) (left) chats with veteran Ben Regalbuto, 82, outside the Salvation Army on George Street in Ottawa, April 30, 2009.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

Stingy federal bureaucrats, including those at Privy Council Office and Treasury Board, are blocking initiatives that could help the country's Afghan war veterans, the Veterans Ombudsman says.

Retired colonel Pat Stogran said the motive appeared to be saving money.

"There's huge amounts of pushback from central agencies on anything to do with veterans in any way that might mean more money going out," Stogran said in an interview.

"Deputy ministers make more on average in one year than a person who loses two legs in Afghanistan can expect to be paid out for the rest of their life," Stogran said in his harshest words yet aimed at the federal bureaucracy.

"Figure that one out."

He said those soldiers who lost legs in the Afghan war had received one-time payments of around \$250,000.

According to Stogran, there has been a major shift in attitude of the Ottawa bureaucracy towards veterans, adding that, in decades past, there was an understanding that programs for veterans were important and public servants made sure that message was relayed to government ministers.

With Canada facing a new wave of war veterans coming home from the Afghan conflict that attitude has changed, Stogran said.

"I have meet people who spent their careers in the department (of Veterans Affairs) who said it used to be that you would go to PCO or Treasury Board with a new program or an entitlement, the response was, 'Our veterans deserve it, bring it on, we'll present it to the political masters.'

"Now if it involves new monies, it doesn't even leave the department."

Treasury Board and Privy Council Office officials referred the Ottawa Citizen to Veterans Affairs Canada for comment.

In an e-mail, Veterans Affairs Canada said funding decisions were made by the government, not by central agencies. It pointed out that funding for veterans had increased from \$2.9 billion in 2005/06 to \$3.41 billion in 2010/2011.

"A number of new programs were created including provision of benefits to Allied veterans who served during the Second World War or the Korean War; and to their eligible survivors," the department said in its e-mail.

"The Government of Canada is committed to the care and support of Canadian Forces members and veterans who served our country in war and peacekeeping efforts."

The e-mail noted the department valued the suggestions for improvement provided by Stogran.

Stogran and some veterans point to the provision of lump-sum payments to wounded soldiers, brought in under the New Veterans Charter, as a way the federal government had limited its long-term financial liability to veterans.

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Under the new charter, disabled veterans who follow a rehabilitation program will receive a lump payment and a monthly cheque representing 75 per cent of their "pre-release" salary until they find a job in civilian life. The lump-sum can be up to \$276,080 based on the extent of the disability.

If they are too injured to work, they receive 75 per cent of their salary until age 65, as well as access to programs and funds for specific needs.

Under the previous system, injured soldiers were guaranteed monthly pension payments for life, and those pensions increased if a condition worsened.

Stogran said he was receiving cases where young veterans, some dealing with mental issues from their time in Afghanistan, had quickly spent all their lump sum payment, leaving themselves destitute.

Veterans Affairs Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn, however, has pointed out that, in a survey done for the department, 69 per cent of veterans who received the tax free lump-sum payment were happy with that.

Stogran, however, suggested that group consisted of those who were able to rebound quickly from injuries. "In other words, the 69 per cent who are relatively able-bodied, are quite happy to get a mitt full of money," he said. "But I'm concerned about that 31 per cent who are the real hurting units."

Stogran said he was approached the other day by the former wife of an injured soldier who gambled away his lump-sum payment.

Other veterans, such as Cpl. Martin Renaud, who lost both legs in an explosion in Afghanistan, have spoken out about the lack of financial support. Renaud, 22, was paid a lump sum disability benefit of \$250,000 for the loss of his legs.

He said that the money was not lasting long because he had to buy a special car to drive and would have to move into a remodelled condominium with disability access.

A complete review of the New Veterans Charter is under way and will be completed in December, the government says.

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