

VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE

June 14th, 2011, Planning Meeting Discussion Overview

PARTICIPANTS:

Lorne McCartney	Army, Navy, Air Force Veterans in Canada
Brad White	Royal Canadian Legion
Patricia Varga	Royal Canadian Legion
Brian Forbes	National Council of Veteran Associations
Faye Lavell	National Council of Veteran Associations
Ron Griffis	Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping
Alan Glass	Gulf War Veterans Association of Canada
Ray Kokkonen	Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association
John Eggenberger	Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association
Gordon Jenkins	NATO Veterans Organization of Canada
Jarrott Holtzhaeur	NATO Veterans Organization of Canada
Don Leonardo	VeteransofCanada.ca
Michael Blais	Canadian Veterans Advocacy
Doug Clark	Canadian Veterans Advocacy
Richard Barette	Veterans UN-NATO Canada
Daniel Drapeau	Veterans UN-NATO Canada
Guy Parent	Veterans Ombudsman
Muriel Westmorland	Former New Veterans Charter Advisory Group
Bruce Henwood	Former Special Needs Advisory Group

Departmental Officials

James Gilbert	ADM, Policy, Communications and Commemoration
Colleen Soltermann	Director, Outreach, Consultation and Engagement
Karen Gallant	Analyst, Outreach, Consultation and Engagement

OPENING REMARKS

The meeting began with opening remarks from Mr. James Gilbert, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Communications and Commemoration. After which, the Minister of Veterans Affairs accompanied by the Deputy Minister joined the meeting, and each said a few words. They then responded to questions.

The first question pertained to the Government's Budget changes affecting Government Departments. The response was that all Departments will have to develop proposals, related to both program and operational expenditures, which would provide Government with the opportunity to reinvest in priority areas. Veterans Organizations will be informed if there are any impact on services to Veterans.

The second question pertained to whether Bill C-55 benefits will be backdated to the date of announcement. The response was that once Bill C-55 enhancements come into

Draft 1, July 18, 2011

Force, those who qualify will receive benefits, however, there will be no-retroactivity of payments to the date of announcement.

INTRODUCTIONS - ROUND TABLE

Mr. Gilbert invited participants to provide a 3 to 5 minute overview of their organization and to present one or two key priorities. Participants agreed that meeting could proceed in English, but that questions in French would be welcome. Participants agreed that there would be no video or audio recordings of meeting.

Participants each took turn to provide a brief presentation of their organization and its priorities. Collectively, participants represent the interests of all Veterans (including Second World War, Korean War, Post-Korean War, Peacekeeping, Afghanistan), serving members and their families. Many share common priorities, ongoing improvements to Veterans benefits and services, including the New Veterans Charter, severely disabled Veterans, homeless Veterans, families and Remembrance.

Participants raised concerns over the dissolution of the previous advisory groups, in particular as many of the recommendations made have gone unaddressed. Overall, Bill C-55 provides important enhancements to the New Veterans Charter, which has addressed some of the previous advisory groups' recommendations; however, much still needs to be done. Participants emphasized that there continues to be unmet needs and that recommendations made by previous advisory groups remain relevant in addressing such needs. In addition, it is essential to ensure that previous independent advisory group members, providing expertise in Veterans issues, continue to be engaged in a manner in which their expertise can be brought to the Department.

The streamlining of Veterans Affairs Canada's processes can present opportunities. In its decision-making processes, the Department should be looking to make better use of evidence produced by other countries, as well as seeking to incorporate presumptions and assumptions in its decision-making processes.

Veterans Organizations provide quick and broad-based communications opportunities to reach Veterans, serving members and their families.

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, the only Government mandated voice of Veterans, will participate as an observer.

Participants recognize that they all share a common cause – Veterans – and that all can collaborate.

Departmental response

Mr. Gilbert thanked everyone for their presentations. He noted that while there is much diversity among the group there are many similarities and that all share a common cause. He recognizes that the Department needs to improve how it supports Veterans. He provided an overview of his three key priority areas: first, the New Veterans Charter and the regulatory changes required to implement the enhancements passed in Bill C-

Draft 1, July 18, 2011

55; second, enhanced outreach to stakeholders through meetings, such as the stakeholder committee meetings and CF base visits, to create more awareness of the New Veterans Charter policy suite; and third, Commemoration, such as the Centennial of the First World War and the end of the Mission in Afghanistan – seeking to engage in meaningful ways in Canada and abroad.

DISCUSSION ON STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE

Mr. Gilbert opened discussion by indicating that a new stakeholder structure is being contemplated, and that the old structure is not an option. New people are being brought to the table through new organizations providing new voices and more diverse input on Veterans issues. He emphasized that the proposed Departmental Stakeholder Committee would not replace the need for ongoing communication between Veterans Affairs Canada and Veterans organizations, which could be in the form of bi- and multi-lateral meetings, telephone discussions and e-mails. The committee would provide a mechanism to share issues and policies and provide a sounding board for the Department, for example as it seeks innovative ways to use technology in reaching Veterans and their organizations.

Mr. Gilbert briefly reviewed the discussion guide points, which include: role and objective, composition, operations, meeting etiquette and reimbursements. He indicated that the discussion will serve to help shape terms of reference for the Departmental Stakeholder Committee.

Discussion on Role and Objectives

Participants are seeking more than a forum at which they can share information on issues. They want to be able to engage in discussions and debates on common issues. They want to contribute to the development, improvement and evaluation of VAC programs, policies and services.

The former chairs of VAC advisory committees and representatives of organizations that have traditionally been engaged in these committees questioned the Department's decision to disband the former advisory structures. Much work, effort and time was devoted to these previous committees, while much expertise and knowledge was developed. Their recommendations remain valid and pertinent. New organizations were pleased to be included and expressed support for the work and recommendations of previous committees.

Departmental Response

Mr. Gilbert responded by indicating that Veterans Affairs Canada was changing its approach, for a number of reasons. The former structures have served their time. The former committees were instrumental in developing the New Veterans Charter and its enhancements; their work is not being set aside; their recommendations continue to guide the Department.

Mr. Gilbert, while recognizing the value of these former structures, also indicated that they led to much frustration. VAC was not always able to respond to their

Draft 1, July 18, 2011

recommendations in the manner in which members expected. The approach being considered will take a more focused approach, concentrating on identifying a few (five or six) key issues at a time to be considered and explored. Input of researchers and academics will be sought through vehicles such as the Canadian Institute for Military and Veterans Health Research as well as from other institutions.

Finally, new organizations are being included, providing a stronger representation of our younger CF Veterans.

Discussion on Composition

Participants noted that there should be representation from Royal Canadian Mounted Police Veterans, and that the Chief of Military Personnel or his representative should be on the Departmental Stakeholder Committee.

Participants suggested that the Departmental Stakeholder Committee should have sub-committees which would provide for focused centres of discussion, similarly to the previous advisory committees. In addition, the committee should include researchers and academics, as was previously the case.

Departmental Response

Mr. Gilbert indicated that he would take recommendation with respect to representation of Royal Canadian Mounted Police Veterans under advisement. He also indicated that he would discuss Canadian Forces representation with the Chief of Military Personnel. In addition, Mr. Gilbert indicated that consideration is being given to the inclusion of a representative for Aboriginal/First Nations/Métis Veterans.

With respect to research representatives on the Committee and sub-committees, Mr. Gilbert indicated that Veterans Affairs Canada needs to base its programs and services on evidence. However, the approach he anticipates would not include experts and academics on the committee as a source of research, or establish sub-committees to provide evidence or focused centres. Rather, the approach anticipated would be that the Departmental Stakeholder Committee would identify key issues to be explored and the evidence that would be required. The committee would help identify the source of the evidence required, which the Department would then seek out in order to engage appropriate experts and academics to help develop the necessary evidence. Having the chairs of Veterans Affairs Canada's former advisory as members of the Departmental Stakeholder Committee will facilitate the identification of required evidence and potential sources.

Discussion on Operations – Frequency of meetings

Participants indicated that one face-to-face meeting per year would be insufficient, if the Department wants to engage participants in meaningful discussions on issues of importance to Veterans and Veterans' Organizations.

Departmental Response

Draft 1, July 18, 2011

Mr. Gilbert indicated that he will consider having at least two face-to-face meetings on an annual basis. However, number of face-to-face meetings will be a balance between availability and budget. In addition, other options will be considered such as meetings by teleconference.

Etiquette/ Rules of Engagement

Mr. Gilbert indicated that the need for reporting to membership is understood, whether by e-mail, in person or on Web page/Facebook and that, while dissemination of information is important, it is also essential that comments not be attributed to specific individuals or organizations.

Representatives of Veterans Organizations indicated that when communicating with membership, it will be important to distinguish between “discussion topics” versus “reality/decisions”. They also recognized that they will need to keep expectations realistic; however, they emphasize there is a need for concrete actions resulting from participation on the Departmental Stakeholder Committee, while keeping in mind that work of committee is a long term endeavour and that “we can’t get everything”.

Reimbursements

Mr. Gilbert indicated that travel and accommodation expenses will be covered for participation at meetings of the Departmental Stakeholder Committee. Veterans Affairs Canada will usually cover the costs of one participant per organization at stakeholder committee meetings.

Next Steps

Participants agreed to meet again in September/October 2011, to review a Terms of Reference, to review the 16 recommendations of the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group and to develop a workplan. VAC will seek the opportunity to determine if it can engage former Advisory Committee Chairs in the development a document to facilitate the review.

Participants indicated that representatives of the RCMP Veterans’ Organization and the Chief of Military Personnel or his office should be also included. The ADM indicated that representation of Aboriginal/First Nations/Metis Veterans will also be considered.