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## Soldiers squander disability payouts

By ALTHIA RAJ, Parliamentary Bureau

OTTAWA — Canada's top soldier says he's concerned some younger vets are blowing their disability awards on trucks and sports cars instead of saving money, and he hopes Veterans Affairs will offers soldiers different payments options if they are wounded.



Gen. Walter Natynczyk, Canada's top military commander. (Darren Brown, QMI Agency file photo)

Gen. Walter Natynczyk, chief of the defence staff, told QMI Agency each soldier is different and the Department of National Defence is working with Veterans Affairs to see "what are the gaps" so new veterans, those coming back from Kandahar, can be taken care of.

Veterans' groups are overwhelmingly opposed to a new policy by the Conservative government that eliminated monthly disability pensions in favour of lump-sum payments, up to a maximum of \$276,080, if they are permanently disabled.

Natynczyk told a group of soldiers, concerned they'll have nothing left if they get their legs blown up and spend their award adapting their homes for their disability, that he's aware there's a problem.

"The monthly pension was great for younger vets and the lump-sum payment was better for older veterans. But now we have a mix," he said. "Some younger veterans took their cash and bought Porsches, boats and souped-up trucks, and now they are broke. It's always hard when you have people who are 21, 22 and 23 years old."

Natynczyk told QMI Agency, each person is different and Veterans Affairs should consider that when they look at the types of programs in the future.

"Everyone is a unique case ... and so you really do need a bit of a menu of options for people to chose and make an informed decision about what is right for their family's circumstances," he said.

But Veterans Affairs Minister Jean Pierre Blackburn believes there is absolutely no need to revisit lump-sum payments and he's opposed to providing soldiers with options.

A survey by his department of 1,048 recipients of the lump-sum payments suggested 69% of respondents preferred the lump sum.

Blackburn told QMI Agency that's the majority and there is no need to adjust the program for 31% that prefer something else.

Still, the minister said, he'll approach veterans' groups with the survey's finding and he's open to hearing from them.

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