



Government  
of Canada

Gouvernement  
du Canada

Veterans  
Ombud

Ombud  
des vétérans



# Annual Report 2020–2021

*Veterans*  
*Ombud*  
*des vétérans*

Canada 

## DECEMBER 2021

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## OUR MISSION

We **investigate** complaints and **challenge** the policies and decisions of Veterans Affairs Canada where we find individual or systemic unfairness.

## OUR VISION

We strive to be an **independent** and **respected** voice for fairness and a **champion** for the well-being of Veterans and their families.

## OUR PRIORITIES

- **Building trust:** We strive to provide excellent service to all Veterans and their families.
- **Veteran / Family Health and Well-being:** We recommend changes to the benefits and services provided by VAC to improve the health and well-being of Veterans and their families.
- **Fair and timely access to VAC Benefits and Services:** We identify unfairness, inefficiency and excessive complexity in how VAC administers its programs and services.

# Veterans *Ombud* des vétérans

## CONTACT US



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**Mail:** Office of the Veterans Ombud P.O. Box 66 Charlottetown, PE C1A 7K2

**Submit Online Complaint:** <https://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/en/get-started/complaint>



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# MESSAGE FROM THE VETERANS OMBUD

I am pleased to present the 2020-2021 Annual Report of the Office of the Veterans Ombud. It has been an extraordinary year, to say the least. When I was appointed in November 2020, I joined a team that was running at full capacity despite the pandemic and the shift to remote working, stewarded most ably by the Deputy Ombud, Sharon Squire. Her leadership and vision were invaluable in keeping the Office on track in accomplishing its mandate and moving forward on several initiatives.

My first priority was to understand the concerns of the Veteran community. Having heard from over 40 Veterans and stakeholder organizations, we took the time to refresh our key statements and to determine where we should best focus our investigative resources. One thing that stood out for me was a clear need to help Veterans as well as still-serving CAF and RCMP members know what it is that our Office can do for them when they are having trouble with accessing benefits and services from VAC. We cannot help Veterans and their families if they don't know who we are and what we do.

It is also crystal clear that our Veterans continue to be deeply frustrated with the backlog of disability claims waiting to be decided by VAC. As has been the case for the past few years, this is the chief complaint we receive. What is more distressing, however, is that the disability claim serves as the gateway into VAC-funded treatment benefits for the conditions being claimed by Veterans. Although costs incurred for treatment may be reimbursed back to the date of application, the extended wait time to receive approval can still

translate into extended wait times for much needed treatments. This is the true cost of the "backlog" and can constitute a real and substantial barrier for Veterans in their transition into civilian life. Having seen and heard the stories of Veterans suffering because they cannot afford treatment for conditions related to their service to Canada, I share their frustration and like my predecessor, urge the Government to do what it takes to meet its service standard on deciding disability claims for Veterans.

But it is not only Veterans who need assistance after service. We know that families also serve, and thus they are deserving of formal recognition of the roles they play and the impact of service on their lives. The systemic investigative work undertaken by the Office this past year shines a light on some aspects of family service, in particular the support of spouses during military-civilian transition and the need of family members for VAC-funded mental health treatment in their own right for their conditions related to service. The stories are heart-breaking and speak to an overlooked and often desperate need. Families are not part of the "furniture and effects" and their support to Veterans and still-serving members has long been simply taken for granted. It is time for the Government to do better for service families.

The Office has accomplished a great deal in this pandemic year, and I am proud of our team. In our primary mandate of helping individual Veterans or still-serving members who are having difficulty in accessing VAC benefits and services, we have been able to achieve a positive outcome for almost every complaint that is not about the wait time for disability claims. I look forward to being able to meet Veterans and still-serving members in their communities as soon as the public health advice permits to let them know that they have an advocate for fairness and how we can be of service to them. And I look forward to our next series of investigations into systemic issues that affect Veteran/Family Health and Well-being and Fair & Timely Access to VAC Benefits and Services.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Jardine'.

**COLONEL (RETIRED) NISHIKA JARDINE**  
**VETERANS OMBUD**



# 2020-2021 HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DEPUTY VETERANS OMBUD

*The past year was one of many changes. In November 2020 we were pleased to welcome Colonel (Retired) Nishika Jardine as Veterans Ombud, bringing her 37 years of military experience and leadership to the role. It was my honour to provide leadership to the office in the interval following the departure of Colonel (Retired) Craig Dalton. During the past year, the OVO team worked tirelessly to achieve fairness for Veterans and their families.*

## HIGHLIGHTS

During 2020-2021 we continued to address a variety of individual complaints of unfairness from Veterans and their families.

The impact of our work is illustrated in the stories in the following pages—from assisting a Veteran to obtain payment for treatment, to resolving an overpayment issue, to obtaining the benefits to which a Veteran was entitled. Many of our cases are complex and require in-depth review and liaison with VAC to resolve issues of unfairness. To enhance our effectiveness, we redesigned our approach to escalating individual cases to the Deputy Minister and Minister, streamlined our business processes and integrated our online complaint form into our case management system. I am proud that we were able to exceed our service standard in responding to individual Veteran complaints.

Often our individual investigations also uncover systemic unfairness such as the lack of support for mental health treatment for families in their own right for conditions related to military service. We also identified gaps in how VAC counselled Veterans regarding their eligibility for the Supplementary Retirement Benefit and found that some Veterans may not have received this benefit when it was discontinued due to the provision of unclear information. Our Financial Compensation for Veterans Report compared benefits under the Pension for Life regime to financial benefits available to Veterans prior to April 1, 2019 under the *Veterans Well-being Act* and the *Pension Act*. These investigations resulted in the submission of 10 recommendations to the Minister/VAC.

We also focused on the role of spouses in the successful transition of Veterans from military to civilian life. We published a study highlighting the important role of spouses and a literature review of research on the experiences of spouses of medically-released CAF Veterans.

Pivoting to the virtual world, we held two successful events. In March the OVO held a virtual forum of 24 women CAF and RCMP Veterans, discussing means to improve health care benefits and services to women Veterans and how the OVO could provide better services to women Veterans. In November 2020, we held our first virtual Veterans Ombud Commendation ceremony recognizing six recipients from across Canada.

Finally, an independent program evaluation of the OVO was conducted. Several recommendations such as implementing micro-systemic investigations and enhancing subject matter specialization in our individual complaint investigations were suggested. We accepted all of the recommendations and they have been included in our service improvement plans.



## YEAR AHEAD

We look forward to a successful year ahead. To enhance access to our services, we will launch an online booking tool to enable Veterans and their families to book an appointment with us. We will implement service improvements to our individual complaint process based on your feedback.

We will continue to identify gaps in VAC programs and services that result in unfairness to Veterans and their families. We will examine peer support for Veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma; investigate how consequential sexual dysfunction decisions are made by VAC; examine supports available to Veterans and their families to support injured and ill Veterans to stay in their homes, and assess the Additional Monthly Amount benefit.

We will revamp our website and develop an OVO video to provide the information you need to know about our services. As COVID restrictions are relaxed, we intend to expand our outreach and awareness about the OVO. Please spread the word about the important work of the OVO.

This will be my last annual report. As I approach retirement in the coming year, I must express my pride in the accomplishments of our team and their continual dedication to achieving fairness for Veterans and their families. I would also like to recognize the retirement of Michel Guay, Director of Intervention Services, who has provided leadership to the OVO since its inception.



**SHARON SQUIRE**  
**DEPUTY VETERANS OMBUD**



# OUR ORGANIZATION: ADVANCING FAIRNESS FOR CANADA'S VETERANS

## Our organization is made up of the:

- Veterans Ombud
- Deputy Veterans Ombud and Executive Director
- Intervention Directorate
- Corporate Services Directorate
- Strategic Review and Analysis Directorate
- Communications Directorate

The OVO has offices in both Charlottetown, PEI, and the National Capital Region. These offices house 32 employees. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, we began working from home in March 2020, providing uninterrupted frontline services to individual Veterans and their families, investigating systemic issues, and reaching out and engaging Veterans and other stakeholders.

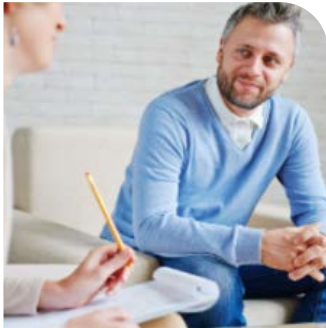
# SERVING VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

## WHY SHOULD VETERANS CONTACT US?

- If Veterans feel that any of their rights have not been upheld or a decision is unfair, they have the right to make a complaint with the Veterans Ombud.
- The *Veterans Bill of Rights* sets out Veterans' right to be treated with respect, dignity, fairness and courtesy, and other rights.
- The Veterans Ombud operates independently of VAC. We remain impartial as we listen to the issue. We review the Veteran's file and communicate with them in clear language so they can understand the options. We evaluate how they were treated, how the process was followed and whether the outcome is fair. If we find something unfair in their case, we advocate for fairness on their behalf.

# OUR WORK: FEATURED CASES

## VETERAN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT CONTINUED THANKS TO A TIMELY SOLUTION



A Veteran asked us to intervene in his case to persuade VAC to cover the costs of continuing the psychological treatment as the Veteran had exceeded the limit of his insurance plan. In talking with VAC, he was advised that he couldn't access the VAC coverage

through the Rehabilitation Program because he had been working since leaving the military. He also did not qualify for the treatment under the disability benefit scheme as he had never applied for a Disability Award, and getting approval for such could take up to 10 months. Upon review of the situation, we made the case to VAC that being employed should not prevent the Veteran from accessing treatment under the Rehabilitation program. VAC agreed. He applied for the disability benefit as a long-term solution and, in the interim, was approved for coverage under the Rehabilitation program. The Veteran was able to continue psychological treatment without a break.

## ON TIME: GETTING A VETERAN'S APPLICATION DATE CORRECTED



The most common complaint we receive at the OVO relates to the length of time it takes to get a VAC disability benefit decision. When VAC receives the completed application form and required documentation, the Department advises the Veteran of their Service

Standard Start Date and the clock starts ticking. A Veteran, who suspected the start date for their Disability Award reassessment application was inaccurate, approached our office for assistance.

The OVO Intervention Officer found that the start date was incorrect, and requested that the VAC National Program Manager correct it. Thanks to our intervention, this Veteran did not have to wait as long for a decision.

## A LONG ROAD TO REDRESS: OVERPAYMENT ISSUE RESOLVED AND PENSION RESTORED



Distraught and feeling vulnerable, a survivor who had received an overpayment notice for almost \$19,000 reached out to us for help. The issue arose because the Veterans Review and Appeal Board requested that VAC convert the lump sum Disability Award (the Veteran

had applied for in error) to a monthly Disability Pension, so they could receive maximum benefits retroactively. But because a Disability Award and Disability Pension cannot be granted for the same condition, this well-meaning change resulted in the substantial overpayment. Our Issues Analyst, upon review of the file, noted that the original communication between the Department and the survivor was unclear and complex. Thanks to two years of persistent effort by our office, the overpayment was cancelled, and the survivor received more than \$100,000 owed to them and had their pension restored to its full amount.

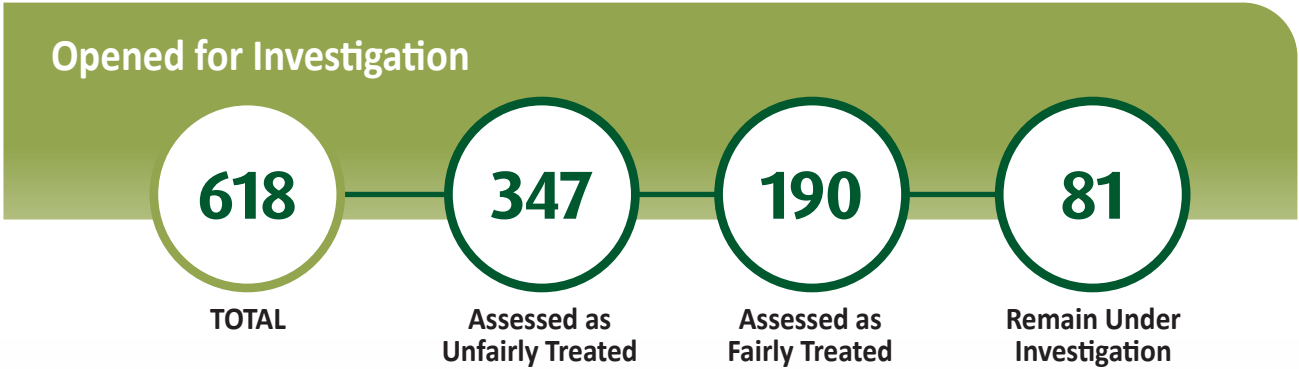
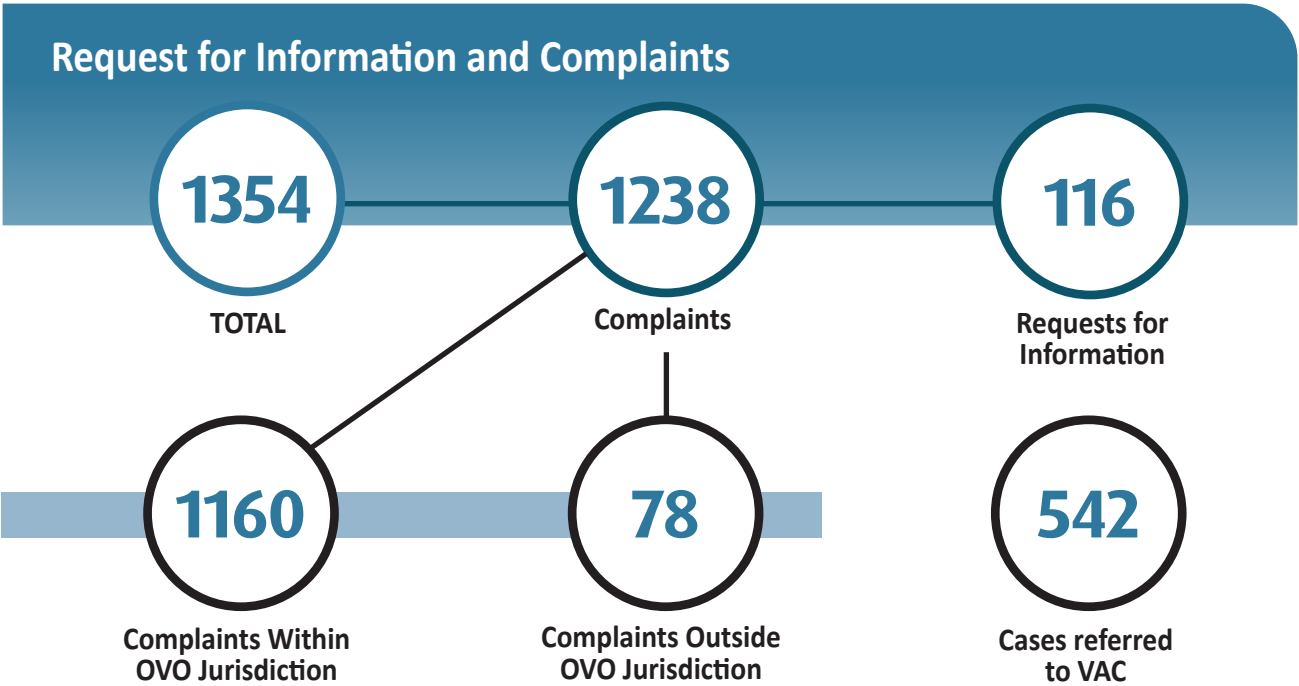


# OUR WORK: OUR CLIENTS

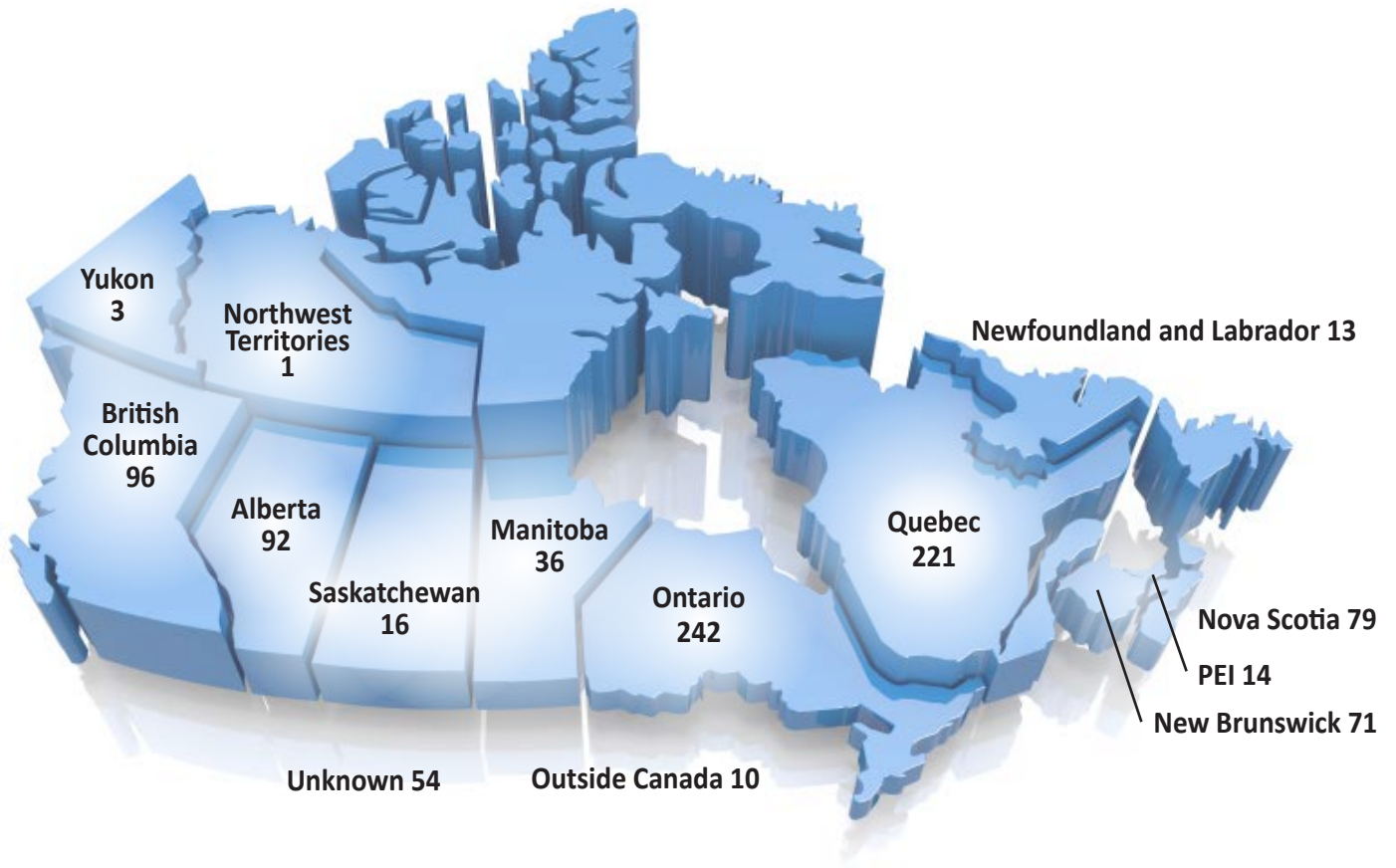
As in previous years, the complaints we received from Veterans and those advocating for them related primarily to Veterans’ health supports and the wait time associated with disability benefit application decisions. We were able to meet or exceed our service standard by investigating 83% of complaints within 60 days, responding to 85% of information requests within five days, and making 87% of referrals within 10 days.

## INTERVENTION BY THE NUMBERS 2020-2021

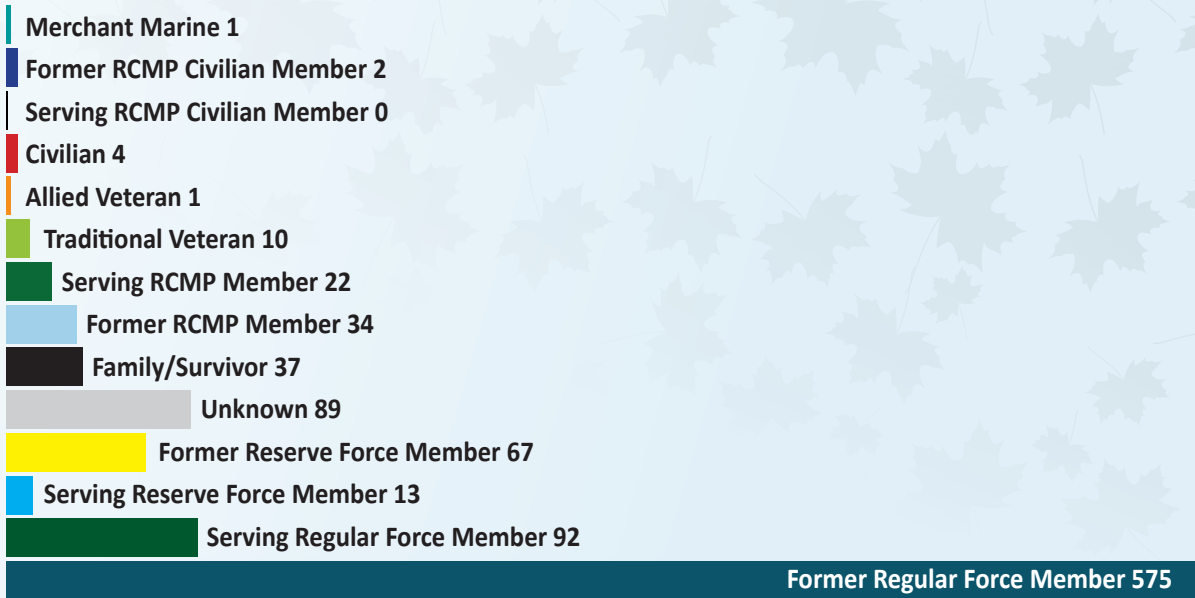
### INFORMATION AND COMPLAINTS



## CLIENTS BY REGION



## CLIENTS BY CATEGORY



## CLIENTS BY AGE

948

Clients

Age 20-29

14

Age 60-69

129

Age 30-39

155

Age 70-79

49

Age 40-49

216

80-89

31

Age 50-59

240

Age >90

14

Unidentified/Not Provided

100

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In striving to provide the best possible service to clients, the Intervention Directorate continually looks for ways to improve and streamline processes. Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the team implemented a number of new measures during 2020-2021.

One of the more significant improvements was the integration of the online complaint form with our case management system. Also, our statistics and service standards are now published on our website in order to be more transparent about the work we do. Equally important, we have instituted quarterly awareness sessions for the staff to better understand the unique nature of serving with the CAF and the RCMP.

# OUR WORK:

# INVESTIGATING SYSTEMIC ISSUES

In addition to investigating individual complaints, the OVO also looks into systemic issues – gaps in or concerns with VAC programs and services – that impact many Veterans. These issues are identified through repeat complaints, investigations into individual cases and stakeholder engagement. The nature and complexity of the issue dictate the type of review or investigation undertaken. Many studies result in recommendations to VAC; in 2020-2021, the OVO made 10 recommendations.

## PUBLICATIONS

### Supplementary Retirement Benefit (SRB) Payout Micro-investigation

This micro-investigation was based on a complaint from a Veteran about VAC neglecting to advise them to apply, when potentially eligible, for the Earnings Loss Benefit (ELB) under the New Veterans Charter. Using a scenario approach, we found that this advice shortcoming ultimately led to inequitable financial impacts with respect to the Supplementary Retirement Benefit (SRB) payout, which hinges on ELB eligibility. When we investigated further, we found that more Veterans were disadvantaged in terms of the amount of their SRB payout, simply due to a lack of knowledge or understanding.

### Financial Compensation for Canadian Veterans Comparative Analysis

The OVO compared the compensation ill and injured Veterans would receive under three regimes: the *Pension Act*, the *New Veterans Charter/Veterans Well-being Act*, and *Pension for Life*. Using a scenario approach, the analysis revealed that no one regime is the most financially generous in all cases. Rather, it found that each individual's situation is unique and that the severity of the Veteran's disability is the main determinant of lifetime compensation. However, even when Veterans have the same disability severity and the same rank and age on release, the lifetime financial compensation can still differ, depending on which regime the application was made under. In other words, the results are inequitable.

### Mental Health Treatment Benefits for Family Members, in their Own Right, for Conditions Related to Military Service Report

When a military member serves, their family serves, too. While families are resilient, the conditions of military service can have challenges and impact each family member differently. The Office

of the Veterans Ombud (OVO) found that family members should have access to their own mental health treatment benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) where the mental health condition is connected to service. Access should be based on their own need for treatment, when that need is connected to military service. It should not be tied to the Veteran's needs, whether the Veteran seeks treatment, or how the treatment will impact the Veteran.

### Spouses Supporting Transition Qualitative Study

The OVO's 2017 report *Transitioning Successfully: A Qualitative Study* found that spouses were the greatest source of support for Veterans transitioning from military to civilian life. Our recent qualitative study explored the lived experience of 13 spouses of CAF Veterans who medically-released between 2006 and 2016 and who self-identified as having successfully transitioned. We found that the top three stressors for spouses during transition are Veterans' health issues, financial security, and family stability. The top supports were identified as family, friends, and counselors/therapists. Informal supports were found to be the most helpful. The study also found that formal supports need to be better communicated, Veterans need better access to health care, spouses need formal support groups, and both Veterans and their spouses would benefit from help in managing finances. Proactive mental health services to members/Veterans and their families during transition would have helped.

### Spouses Supporting Transition Literature Review

A review of the literature on spouses who went through transition in 2006 or later found that spouses inherit a significant amount of unpaid labour and suffer negative impacts to both physical and mental health immediately prior to, during, and following the Veteran's medical release. As a consequence of transition, they often face negative career impacts, social isolation, and a sense of loss. Veterans living with partners report higher levels of satisfaction, adjustment, perceived social support, and fewer difficulties with transition than Veterans living alone or with family members. Overall, the review found there is little research on spouses of Veterans with respect to the military to civilian transition, especially in the Canadian context. More research needs to be done to fully understand the needs of those who support Veterans.

# OUR WORK: SHARING, LISTENING AND CONNECTING

Connecting with Canada's Veterans, their families and other stakeholders is critical to our success. This connection helps guide our work and ensure it is relevant to those we serve. We use a mix of virtual and face-to-face engagement to educate our target audiences about the OVO's services and to hear about issues impacting Veterans and their families.

## REACHING OUT TO OUR AUDIENCE VIRTUALLY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the OVO relied more than ever on virtual engagement to connect with Veterans and their families. Volume 5 of our *Focused on Fairness* e-newsletter, which we emailed to 550 subscribers, has become a helpful source of information about our activities. While the number of website visits decreased in 2020-2021, activity on our social media platforms increased.

## FACE-TO-FACE ENGAGEMENT

The Office of the Veterans Ombud has always placed great importance on outreach to Veterans groups, stakeholders and decision makers. The OVO adjusted to COVID-19 pandemic public health realities by going virtual. Immediately upon assuming the role of Veterans Ombud, Colonel (Ret'd) Nishika Jardine did a virtual tour introducing herself to the Veterans community and stakeholders. Insights gained from these meetings are helping to shape the Ombud's new OVO priorities.

It is worth noting a first-of-its-kind event which was held on March 8, International Women's Day. The outreach activity was dedicated solely to hearing the concerns and ideas of women Veterans. Discussions focused on two key themes: 1) How VAC can improve health care and services for women Veterans; and 2) How the OVO can better serve women Veterans. For example, women Veterans told us that they would have been interested in learning about VAC benefits and services well before they left the CAF or the RCMP. They were also not really aware of the services provided by the OVO. Their feedback will inform our work going forward.



# VETERANS OMBUDSMAN ADVISORY COUNCIL (VOAC)

VOAC advises the Veterans Ombud on matters related to the OVO's mandate. VOAC members bring to the table the diverse perspectives found within the Veterans community. Through their expertise and knowledge, Council members identify emerging issues and provide advice on how to address them. VOAC members also raise awareness within the Veterans community of the OVO and its role.

# VETERANS OMBUDSMAN COMMENDATION AWARDS

The annual Commendation Awards honour outstanding individuals and groups who demonstrate their commitment to the Veterans community through their selfless hard work. Recipients have been nominated by their peers for their exceptional contributions and dedication to improving the lives of Veterans and their families.

## MEMBERS 2020-2021

Pierre Allard  
Heather Armstrong  
Jane Hall  
Jacquie Hannigan  
Marie-Claude Gagnon  
Brigitte Laverdure  
Heather Mackinnon  
David MacLeod  
Brian McKenna  
Jay Milne  
Rebekah Mitchell  
Shauna Mulligan  
Tim O'Loan  
Albert Rivard  
Paul Rutherford  
Kimberley Unterganschnigg  
Christine Wood

## 2020 RECIPIENTS

### Lifetime Contribution

Robert Thibeau  
Wolf William Solkin (1923–2021)  
John "Jack" Joseph O'Reilly

### Individual Contribution

Brigitte Laverdure  
Marie-Claude Gagnon

### National Organization

National Association of Federal Retirees

# FINANCIAL STATEMENT

As per the 2020-21 Departmental Plan, the Veterans Ombudsman's planned spending was \$5.48 million for fiscal year 2020-21. The actual authorities at the end of fiscal year 2020-21 were \$5.69 million.

## 2020-2021 PLANNED SPENDING AND TREASURY BOARD AUTHORITIES

Organization	Salary (Planned)	Operating (Planned)	2020-21 Planned	2020-21 Authorities
Office of the Veterans Ombudsman	\$2,872,300	\$973,900	\$3,846,200	\$4,115,055
Veterans Affairs Canada (provision of services to the Office)	\$899,793	\$179,408	\$1,079,201	\$1,079,201
Employee Benefit Plan			\$558,270	\$492,467
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$3,772,093</b>	<b>\$1,153,308</b>	<b>\$5,483,671</b>	<b>\$5,686,723</b>

## 2020-2021 VETERANS OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM AND OPERATIONAL EXPENDITURES

Program or Operational Requirements	Expenditures
Salaries and Wages	\$3,193,280
<b>Total Salaries and Wages</b>	<b>\$3,193,280</b>
Transportation and Communications	\$3,742
Information	\$20,912
Professional and Special Services	\$374,534
Rentals	\$0
Purchased Repair and Maintenance	\$5,899
Utilities, Materials and Supplies	\$18,125
Acquisition of Machinery and Equipment	\$0
Other	\$2
<b>TOTAL OPERATING EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$423,214</b>
<b>TOTAL - OVO</b>	<b>\$3,616,494</b>

**2020-2021 VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA, PROGRAM AND OPERATIONAL EXPENDITURES  
FOR THE PROVISION OF SERVICES TO THE OVO (EXCLUDING INTERNAL SERVICES)**

<b>Program or Operational Requirements</b>	<b>Expenditures</b>
Salaries and Wages	\$897,238
Operating Expenditures	\$100,570
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$997,808</b>

**2020-2021 SUMMARY OF EXPENDITURES**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Expenditures</b>
Office of the Veterans Ombudsman	\$3,616,493
Veterans Affairs Canada (provision of services)	\$997,808
Employee Benefit Plan	\$492,467
Other (Paylist Allocation etc.)	\$86,745
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$5,193,514</b>

