



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA



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February 12, 2025

The Honourable Darren Fisher
Minister of Veterans Affairs

Sent via email: minister-ministre@veterans.gc.ca

Minister,

RE: Your announcement of support for First Nations Veterans

As this is my first letter to you, I offer congratulations on your appointment as Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence. You have much work to do, Minister, to improve services for Canadian Veterans.

Your Liberal Government, just like the Conservatives before you, has run Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) like an insurance company. According to a former minister, Lawrence MacAulay, VAC denies one-fifth of all disability benefit applications. Meanwhile, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), which sits in judgement of VAC's policies, reverses VAC's decisions and approves 9 out of 10 of the denied applications. But only half of the denied applications are appealed to VRAB because Veterans don't have the energy to fight the government. Veterans are tired of unnecessary administrative burdens. They are tired of having to repeat their stories at every stage in the claims process. They are tired of being denied. All they are asking for are the services and support they are due. It shouldn't be hard to receive what they need, but for many Veterans the system sets them up for failure and hardship.

For Veterans who are women and racialized minorities, the situation is even worse.

I read your [February 7th announcement](#) about the department's renewed relationship with Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to support First Nations Veterans. Your announcement outlined four priority areas for Veterans Affairs, including: to provide culturally-appropriate supports to Veterans; and to address barriers to access VAC programs and services. These two priorities drew my interest in light of what I have learned about Indigenous Veterans.

The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA) was in the midst of a study on the experience of Indigenous and Black Veterans when Parliament was prorogued. Marie Blackburn, Executive Director of the Veterans Association Food Bank in Calgary, helps Veterans access services from VAC. She testified about her interactions with VAC:

"I had a woman veteran who required shelter after her house had burned down. We usually call Veterans Affairs first to see if they can help with some of the assistance. The Veterans Affairs worker said to me that she couldn't give her the money directly because they just drink it away. I asked if that's because she's Indigenous and she said that yes, that's the way it is...When I encouraged the woman to talk to Veterans Affairs, she was terrified to report anything because she didn't want to lose the benefits that she had."

"I've had indigenous veterans who have never had a claim generated because they were told they were not eligible, even though they clearly were."

Minister, these stories illustrate that Indigenous Veterans do not feel safe with Veterans Affairs. They do not trust VAC. Sadly, I have heard similar stories from others in my six years as NDP critic for Veterans Affairs.

An NDP Government would rebuild Veterans Affairs as a trauma-informed care and support centre. It would ensure that VAC workers are properly trained in trauma-informed practices, and that all policies are filtered through a trauma-informed lens, because Veterans who contact VAC are almost all experiencing trauma in one form or another. For example, Veterans who miss document submission deadlines should not be dropped from the benefit program. This policy causes harm to the Veteran and their family and fixes nothing.

Most of all, an NDP Government would believe Veterans. Your government does not. Consider the testimony of Indigenous Veteran Tommy Benjamin:

"If I might interject, I'm in the process again—the fifth time—of applying for benefits.

On my fourth attempt to apply for benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada, I was told that they have no record of my serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. My file has now gone to the national archives. Basically, they couldn't help me anymore and they told me goodbye. These are some of the obstacles I face.

Five times is a significant number of attempts to apply for benefits. It's a frustrating process. How can I explain to anyone that I did serve in the Canadian Armed Forces and then Veterans Affairs Canada tells me that I didn't? Who am I? Am I a non-person? Did I serve in the military? Of course I did, and I'm very proud of that fact."

Minister, you are the seventh Liberal Minister of Veterans Affairs since 2015. Will you follow through and make the necessary departmental changes so Indigenous Veterans and other marginalized Veterans are not subject to disbelief, racist comments, and discriminatory practices? Regrettably, there is no evidence to suggest you will when all of your predecessors have not done so.

Veterans and their families deserve much better than what they have received under Liberal and Conservative governments. New Democrats will not contract out Veterans supports and services to firms owned by Loblaws or tell Veterans that they're asking for too much, like your government has done. New Democrats will not close Veterans Affairs offices and cut benefits like the conservatives have done.

New Democrats will stand beside all Veterans and their families in solidarity and service. We will ensure that each and every Veteran and their family member has the benefits and support they need, delivered with trauma-informed care and respect.

I dare you to do the same.

Sincerely,



Rachel Blaney, MP
North Island-Powell River
NDP critic for Veterans Affairs