

Fair Treatment for Canadian Forces and RCMP Veterans and their Families:



Canada's National War Memorial

Photo Credit: Government of Canada

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By:

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Our country has a long history of standing up for the rights and freedoms Canadians hold dear. The men and women who join the Canadian Forces (CF) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) know they may be called upon to risk their lives on behalf of Canada to uphold peace, security or human rights here at home and around the world. For those who accept the condition of unlimited liability, we honour their service and are grateful for their personal sacrifices, including those sacrifices made by their families.

Canada has a long-standing Social Contract that recognizes the extraordinary commitment of the men and women who hazard their lives in service to our country. This Social Contract acknowledges that our nation and its government and citizens will support these men and women in their missions, honour their service, and look after them and their families if they are injured or die in the service of their country. Reference to this Social Contract is included in many pieces of legislation that defines benefits and services for veterans.

New Democrats value the work and sacrifice of all Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans and currently serving personnel, whether they serve at home, in war, or on peacekeeping missions. We must ensure that our veterans and their families are well cared for, from the moment they sign up to the moment they pass away, including a dignified funeral and burial.

New Democrats have led the way on proposals to improve the programs and services available for Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans' and their families.

New Democrats believe in:

Improve, Review, and Update the New Veterans Charter (NVC) including the lump-sum payment for injured veterans.

New Democrats would review, improve, and update the entire New Veterans Charter (NVC) from top to bottom including the issue of lump-sum payments, earnings loss, support for families, attendant allowance for caregivers, education assistance, career transition, death benefits, and benefits after age 65. We must ensure that NVC programs provide a standard of care and compensation commensurate to those who have accepted the condition of unlimited liability in the service of our country.

Applying Principle of "One Veteran, One Standard" so that all CF and RCMP veterans and their families would be eligible for access to veterans' programs and services, including recognition at commemoration events.

It is unfair that many CF and RCMP veterans cannot access government programs and services for assistance because eligibility is based on strict criteria like "when, where or how they served." This unjustly establishes "classes" of veterans and veterans' families who are eligible for benefits and other "classes" of veterans who are not. The NDP would apply the principle of One Veteran, One Standard, so that all CF and RCMP veterans would be eligible for access to programs and services including equal recognition at commemorative events.

Replacing the politically appointed Veterans Review and Appeal Board with a medical evidence-based peer reviewed process for making decisions on veterans' disability applications, in consultation with veterans and veterans' organizations.

For many years, veterans have been dissatisfied with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB). Members of the VRAB are appointed because of their political connections and many have little military or medical experience. In consultation with veterans and veterans' organizations, the NDP commits to replace the Board with a medical-evidence peer reviewed process for making decisions on veterans' disability applications.

Ending the unfair reduction of service pensions for retired and disabled Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans.

The service pensions of Canadian Forces or RCMP members are unfairly offset when members begin to collect Canada Pension Plan benefits or if members become disabled and collect Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits. The NDP would end these unfair reductions. For their service and sacrifice, veterans and their families deserve to be treated with financial dignity when they retire or become disabled.

Supporting initiatives to help veterans transition into the civilian workforce.

When members retire or leave the Canadian Forces or RCMP due to injury or illness, members and their families may need assistance to make the transition to civilian life. New Democrats would improve transition programs to ensure they meet the needs of members and their families and that these programs are simple and hassle-free. We support programs that help veterans transition to shipbuilding or construction trades and would look to expand these types of agreements with provinces and other industry sectors. We would explore options such as a federal tax credit for private employers hiring veterans and continued access to DND health services during this period of transition to civilian life.

Initiate a full public inquiry into chemical spraying at CFB Gagetown.

New Democrats would initiate a full public inquiry into the chemical spraying at CFB Gagetown that took place from 1956-1984. Residents, families, and Canadian Forces personnel exposed to this spraying continue to have health impacts and should have access to appropriate compensation and benefits.

Expand the Veterans Independence program for all veterans, widows, and widowers including the RCMP.

The NDP would expand the Veterans Independence Program to assist all Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans' and their spouses. Many ailing veterans', widows and widowers do not meet the strict eligibility criteria to access this program. We would simplify access to this program and update coverage to recognize the service and contributions of CF and RCMP veterans' and their spouses.

Ending the unjust offset of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) disability pensions for medically released members of the RCMP.

The NDP would end the unjust offset of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) long-term disability pension benefits for medically released members of the RCMP. Disability pension payments from the Department of Veterans Affairs are offset when members receive long-term disability benefits through their work-place disability insurance plan for injuries occurred while on duty.

This issue mirrors the Service Income Security Insurance Program (SISIP) clawback that affected injured Canadian Forces veterans and was settled through a class action lawsuit.

Continue the Veterans' Long Term Care program including access for modern-day veterans and initiate discussions for new Health Care Centres of Excellence for currently serving CF and RCMP members and veterans and their families.

The federal government intends to phase out dedicated long-term care beds for veterans, passing the responsibility of veterans' long-term care to the provinces. World War II and Korean veterans, as long as they meet certain criteria, are eligible for "departmental contract beds" (also referred to as a priority beds) in approved provincial community care facilities or "veterans' hospital wings". Funding is provided to the provinces for these contract beds. The program and the funding will cease when the last WWII or Korean War veteran passes away. This means that veterans will no longer have priority access to departmental contract beds and will compete with the civilian population for access to long-term care in provincial community care facilities.

New Democrats would continue the veterans' long-term care program, including dedicated departmental contract beds, to ensure priority access for veterans and the continuity of specialized care. We would expand eligibility for access to these contract beds to all CF and RCMP veterans. We believe that the federal government, as part of its Social Contract with veterans, has a responsibility to provide long-term care to all veterans. We would also initiate discussions with the provinces for new Health Care Centres of Excellence for currently serving CF and RCMP members and veterans and their families. The Health Care Centres of Excellence would provide leading edge care specific to the health needs of CF and RCMP personnel including both physical and mental injuries.

Respond to the concerns of "Atomic Veterans" exposed to nuclear weapon trials and clean-up efforts at Chalk River nuclear plant.

Canadian military personnel and their families exposed to nuclear radiation from nuclear weapon trials in the United States and the clean-up at Chalk River nuclear plant have long sought justice and fair compensation. Many of these "atomic veterans" and their families have experienced serious lifelong health difficulties and illness as a result of their exposure to radiation.

The NDP would respond to their concerns with emphasis on determining fair and proper compensation and benefits for these atomic veterans and their families or their estates.

Ensuring that all veterans have access to a dignified funeral and burial by increasing federal government allowances.

All veterans and their families deserve to have access to a dignified funeral and burial. New Democrats would extend eligibility for this program to all CF and RCMP veterans and increase coverage so that program benefits are in line with current funeral and burial expenses.

Removing the restrictive marriage after 60 clause so surviving veterans spouses can access pension and health benefits.

Current legislation restricts annuity and health benefits for CF and RCMP veterans' surviving spouses in the case of marriage after the age of 60. New Democrats would end these archaic marriage/pension restrictions for CF and RCMP veterans and their spouses.

Adopt an Identity Card for CF and RCMP veterans and their families to better facilitate contact and communication with veterans.

New Democrats support the creation of a national veterans' identity card for CF and RCMP veterans to provide visible recognition of service and to better facilitate contact, communication and outreach with veterans and their families and government service providers. An identity card for CF and RCMP veterans would also help to create efficiencies in the delivery of programs.

Increasing the amount of survivors' pensions so that veterans' spouses can manage basic living expenses with dignity.

Veterans' surviving spouses and their children are eligible to receive a portion of their late spouses' disability pension or annuity. New Democrats would increase the allowance given to survivor's and their children from 50% to 66% so that spouses can manage basic living costs with dignity, maintain economic security, and to honour the contribution and sacrifices of the veteran's family.

Supporting research on the unique challenges and health needs of military and RCMP personnel, veterans, and their families over the course of their lives and developing strategies to protect their health.

New Democrats commit to supporting research on the unique health challenges of Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans' and their families. Departments need to better track service-related injuries and identify patterns of injuries and illness, especially with specific service injuries such as hearing loss, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), brain trauma, Operational Service Injuries (OSI) and use this research to adapt programs and services to meet the needs of these veterans and their families.

Better support for those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs) for currently serving CF and RCMP members and veterans and their families.

There are significant gaps in care for CF and RCMP members and their families suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs). New Democrats commit to better support for these veterans and their families and would explore the feasibility of more clinics and emergency crisis centres for CF and RCMP veterans and their families.

Enhance recognition of the contribution of Aboriginal veterans.

Aboriginal men and women have contributed outstanding service and sacrifice to Canada's military and have served in times of war and peace. Yet First Nation, Inuit, and Métis veterans returning from World War I and II, the Korean War, and many other conflicts often did not receive the same education, land, or resettlement benefits as other veterans. New Democrats would enhance recognition of the contribution of aboriginal veterans.

Expanding the role of Veterans Ombudsman to provide independent analysis and reports to Parliament.

New Democrats would expand the role of the Veterans Ombudsman so that the Ombudsman would report to Parliament and have a broader mandate to investigate veterans concerns and issues.

Greater recognition of the contributions of women who served

Women have made significant contributions while serving in Canada's military and RCMP whether they served during war, here at home, or on peacekeeping missions. We honour their service and sacrifice and their role in breaking down barriers towards a full and equal service for all members. New Democrats would ensure that the victories, struggles, and sacrifices, of women veterans are celebrated, remembered, and honoured and that measures are in place to continually safeguard equality of all members.

Ensuring veterans programs and services are kept current, quickly respond to identified gaps in veterans' care and continually update programs and legislation to ensure needs of veterans and their families are met.

New Democrats would mandate frequent reviews of veterans' programs and services to keep them current and responsive. New Democrats want veterans' to have more input into departmental programs and policies and would increase the opportunity for meaningful consultation and input.

Ensuring economic security for Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans and their families.

The men and women who risk their lives on behalf of our country should be assured economic security and that their needs, including the needs of their families, will be taken care of. We have proposed extending the Veterans Independence Program, enhancing survivors' pensions, and supporting homeless veterans and at-risk veterans to help ensure the economic security of CF and RCMP veterans and their families.

Respond to the concerns of gay and lesbian veterans.

Hundreds of servicemen and servicewomen were forced out of the military or "dishonourably discharged" because they were gay or lesbian. New Democrats would respond to the concerns of these veterans with an eye to removing the "dishonourable discharge" from their records. It is never too late to right a wrong.

Respond to concerns about unequal standards of care for injured reservists

Concerns have been raised about unequal standards of care for injured reservists. New Democrats would review these concerns in an effort to ensure fair and equitable treatment for all members and veterans of the Reserve Force.

Review long outstanding grievances of CF and RCMP veterans who have been exposed to hazardous materials like asbestos, defoliant spraying or other identified occupational health issues like hearing loss.

Many veterans and their families have had to fight for access to pension or health benefits. Veterans who have health complications related to exposure to hazardous materials like asbestos, radiation, defoliant spraying, and occupational noise have been denied assistance or experienced difficulty accessing benefits. New Democrats would look at these types of cases to see where benefits and services can be applied. No veteran should fall through the cracks.

Enhancement of Veterans Rights.

Former Veterans Ombudsman Colonel (Ret'd) Pat Stogran proposed 10 principles of fair treatment to help guide legislation, programs, and policies in support of veterans and their families. These principles include the following: transparency of programs that are easy to understand, programs that give veterans the right to live their life with the same dignity they enjoyed while serving, services that take into account the needs of families, health for life, duty to accommodate and several more. New Democrats advocate that these principles be adopted to guide programs and legislation that will meet the needs of CF and RCMP veterans and their families.

Conclusion

This paper summarizes some of the ways New Democrats would improve the programs and services available for Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans' and their families. This list is by no means all inclusive as New Democrats would be responsive to the changing needs of veterans and their families.

New Democrats are committed to improving the lives of CF and RCMP veterans and their families by providing fair benefits that recognize their personal sacrifices and service to our country.

"At the going down of the sun, we will remember them."