

**PARTICIPATION TO THE HALIFAX ROUNDTABLE  
ON CANADA'S DEFENCE POLICY REVIEW  
MGEN (RET) RICHARD V. BLANCHETTE – 28 JUNE 2016  
ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION**

I am pleased to be able to participate in the Halifax Round Table on Canada's Defence Policy review and to speak on behalf of our newly elected Dominion President, Mr. David Flannigan, and nearly 300,000 members. Our mission is to serve veterans, which includes serving military and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members and their families, to promote Remembrance, and to serve our communities and our country.

On May 11, I had already the opportunity to communicate with General (Retd) Ray Henault and Ms. Margaret Purdy, as part of a special meeting organized by CDA (Conference of Defence Associations). At that time, I presented the following eight recommendations:

Sailors, soldiers, airmen, and airwomen are veterans by definition but they will one day retire and the Legion appreciates the double hatting of an Associate Minister of National Defence (MND) and Minister of Veterans Affairs. This will help doing away with some of the irritants known to happen during the transition from active service to retirement. The "tag team" Department of National Defence (DND)-VAC is an excellent start but it must not only be connected at the top. Our first recommendation is therefore that this interdepartmental connexion be reinforced at all levels of authority.

Our second recommendation is that DND, VAC, and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness (for the RCMP) put in place complementary policies, practices, and programs supported by a sustainable research program to enable the healthy transition of all veterans and their families. We have to face the harsh reality that physical and mental health issues are with us for a long time and this Defence Policy Review needs to cover and leverage the current work of many institutes already involved in this collective and challenging situation.

Our third recommendation is an extension of the previous one. Our experience from the national Veterans Transition Program provides evidence that some veterans and their families feel isolated and need to be welcomed home in a very real way. We recommend that DND recognize and support the expansion of the Veterans Transition Program nationally, and ensure that serving CAF members affected by operational stress injuries be given the time off to have access to the program.

Our fourth recommendation addresses transition interviews. These must be conducted early in the release process in order to assist members and their families in identifying their needs in advance. For service members who already receive the support of a case manager from Veterans Affairs Canada, we strongly recommend that part of the transition interview be conducted in the presence of family members.

Families can request assistance from Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs) as there is a Family Liaison Officer, a social worker located in the Integrated Personnel Support Centres, who can provide assistance to the family. Given that Military Family Resource Centres are well established in areas where we have a large number of veterans, our fifth recommendation is that DND consider opening MFRCs to all military members, veterans and their families.

The Legion continues to be concerned with the lack of a formal capability and/or program that proactively reaches out to Reserve Units and their members to ensure that Reserve Force members are being looked after with regards to disability benefits from Veterans Affairs Canada. Our sixth recommendation is that the military chain of command proactively support the organisation and execution of briefings to Reserve units.

The Legion has a presence at most of the Canadian Forces Integrated Personnel Support Centres on each base to assist veterans and their families, as part of the transition process. However, many serving members have not been informed of our services and our seventh recommendation is therefore complementary to the previous one. The chain of command needs to ensure that all Regular Force serving members, throughout their professional development, be briefed on and be knowledgeable about the services available to them. Although we may not be able to establish a direct link between this lack of knowledge of the services offered and the high rate of suicides among service members and veterans, we are convinced that a better outreach of the help available will have a positive effect on the morale of troops and the military community in general.

The *New Veterans Charter* and the *Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act* are comprehensive and complex. Our veterans need to know not only the weaknesses but also the strengths behind the legislation, programs, services, and benefits. We are far from a reasonable standard and I would suggest that this highlights the ineffectiveness of the Government's communication of the programs and services available to veterans. Our eight and final recommendation is therefore that the Government needs to better communicate how it will put in place the resources and programs to meet the needs expressed in all ministerial mandate letters. In other words, this must not be a self-service for our veterans; they deserve to be told what there is on this complex menu that affects their very livelihood.

In conclusion, and in preparation for the roundtable discussion, I will certainly be ready to put these recommendations in the overall context on which the organizers choose to focus.