



Veterans Review and
Appeal Board Canada

Tribunal des anciens combattants
(révision et appel) Canada

Strategic Plan 2016-2021

Veterans Review and Appeal Board

Chair's Message

I am very pleased to present the Strategic Plan for the Veterans Review and Appeal Board for 2016-2021.

This plan is dedicated to the people we are honoured to serve: Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP members, and their families. It is anchored in our legislated mandate, which is to provide an independent appeal process for disability benefits decisions made by Veterans Affairs Canada. This plan is guided by our vision and mission to ensure applicants receive all the benefits they are entitled to under law through fair and timely hearings and decisions. Finally, it describes our context—the challenges we face and the risks we accept—and sets out the priorities and activities that will help our Board members and staff work together to fulfill our commitment to Veterans and their families.



When we started work on this plan last year, the Board was getting ready to mark its 20th year of operations. Since 1995, we have been providing applicants with the opportunity to have hearings where they tell us their story – how their disability is related to their service and how it affects their lives. The Board has been able to award benefits to tens of thousands of Veterans based on their testimony and credible evidence – and in doing so, has contributed greatly to fairness in the disability benefits programs.

While our mandate for Veterans has remained constant over the years, our way of working has changed considerably. To put it another way – fairness is still our *raison d'être* but our operations look different today than in the past. This plan highlights how we are continuing to modernize through the use of technology – improving our systems and streamlining our processes to serve Veterans better. It describes how our workload is evolving, and how we are investing in our people to meet future challenges.

In short, this strategic plan renews our commitment to service delivery, to investing in our employees, and to openness and accountability. Most importantly, it renews our commitment to Veterans and their families. I encourage you to read it.

Thomas Jarmyn
Acting Chair

Organizational Overview

What We Do

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB, the Board) is the administrative tribunal that provides an independent avenue of appeal for disability benefits decisions made by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC, the Department). The Board operates at arm's length from the Department to provide a fair and independent appeal process for Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and RCMP members, and their families.

The Board ensures that applicants receive their legal entitlements for disabilities related to service. To do this, we offer two levels of redress for disability benefits decisions: a Review hearing; and, if the applicant remains dissatisfied, a subsequent Appeal hearing. The Board also provides the final level of appeal for War Veterans Allowance decisions.

Our Mandate

The Board's mandate is set out in the *Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act*. This Act provides the Board with full and exclusive jurisdiction to hear, determine and deal with all applications for review and appeal made under the *Pension Act*, *Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act - Part 3*, the *War Veterans Allowance Act* and other Acts of Parliament. The Board also adjudicates duty-related pension applications under the authority of the *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Pension Continuation Act* and the *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Superannuation Act*.

Our Vision, Mission and Values

The Board's Vision, Mission, and Values express our commitment to serving Veterans and their families. These statements inform our work and guide all employees.

Vision

The Board is recognized as the independent and fair appeal tribunal that ensures Veterans obtain the benefits they are entitled to for service-related disabilities.

Mission

To provide Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP members, and their families with timely, respectful hearings and fair, plain-language decisions.

Values

Independence: We provide Veterans with hearings and decisions that are free from outside influences.

Impartiality: We treat Veterans in a fair and unbiased manner.

Respect: We treat Veterans, and one another, with courtesy and respect.

Excellence: We strive to serve Veterans better through continuous improvement and innovation.

Integrity: We enhance public confidence and trust in the appeal process by being professional and ethical.

Accountability: We are open and transparent, so that Veterans and Canadians can hold us accountable for our actions and decisions.

Our Work Environment

Current Realities

The Board's program is delivered by up to 25 members and approximately 75 staff. One-third of the members work at the Board's administration office in Charlottetown to conduct appeal hearings; the others are based in cities across Canada to conduct review hearings in approximately 23 locations. The review hearing is the only time in the disability benefits adjudication process when the Veteran can appear before decision-makers and tell their story in their own words.

As a small organization with an important mandate, the Board faces many challenges in delivering its program. It must:

- manage fluctuating volumes of requests for hearings from applicants who have the right to appeal at any time if they are dissatisfied with a pension or award decision;
- respond to increased demands for shorter wait times for hearings and decisions; and
- be more open in its decision making and meet increased reporting requirements for accountability.

The Board is committed to addressing these challenges and continues to look for ways to serve Veterans better.

Workload

Since its creation in 1995, the Board has been effective in designing its operational structure and using its resources to deliver its program. While the number of resources have remained fairly stable over time, the workload has changed considerably.

The Board's workload is primarily correlated with the annual volume of Departmental decisions (about 10% of VAC decisions are appealed to the Board). The number of decisions made by the Department decreased between 2010-11 and 2014-15. As a result, the Board's workload also decreased during this timeframe. However, the cases that are brought forward are usually more complex than in the past. Today, cases often involve medical conditions and issues that make it challenging for the Veteran to establish the required relationship between the disability and service.

The Board's workload is also impacted by new programs or policies implemented by the Department. The introduction of new benefits with appeal rights to the Board, such as the Critical Injury Benefit, as well as changes to the Department's adjudication model, can result in new work or challenges for the Board.

When it forecasts its work, the Board examines the trends in the volumes and outcomes of VAC disability pension and award decisions. Both can fluctuate from year to year. Forecasting is further complicated by the fact that there is no time limit for Veterans to appeal a decision to the Board, and they can bring forward new evidence at each level of redress.

Human Resources

The Board relies on its members and staff to provide Veterans and their families with a fair and timely appeal process. As a small tribunal, it faces unique challenges and makes ongoing efforts to maintain the human resources it needs to deliver the program.

Members of the Board are Governor-in-Council appointees selected from a qualified pool of Canadians. As the membership is always changing, it is both a challenge and a priority for the Board to maintain a good balance of experienced and new members.

The Board must also spend time training new members before they can hear cases. Experience has demonstrated that following an initial training period of approximately eight weeks, new

Board members need at least three months of mentoring to prepare them for the full scope of their decision-making responsibilities in a fast-paced, high volume work environment.

In this context, the Board must:

- ensure it recruits enough qualified candidates for appointment as Board members;
- maintain good communications with the Minister on appointment needs; and
- provide effective training to support Board members in making fair, well-reasoned decisions for applicants.

Staff provide continuity in knowledge and information to the dynamic membership. Over the next five years, an increasing number of experienced staff will be eligible to retire. To guide it in dealing with this staffing challenge, the Board has put in place an Integrated Business Plan. It has committed to review the plan biannually, and more often as required, to ensure staff vacancies are filled with the right competencies in a timely manner. This will ensure that valuable corporate knowledge is transferred and retained.

Blueprint 2020

Government-wide initiatives also have the potential to influence the Board and its program. For example, *Blueprint 2020* was launched by the Clerk of the Privy Council in June 2013. *Blueprint 2020* presents a vision of a high-performing public service that works collaboratively, makes use of new technologies, and seeks efficient and innovative approaches in its work. In May 2014, the Clerk released *Destination 2020* identifying the priorities for action to achieve the vision.

The Board continues to support these initiatives by actively looking for opportunities to modernize its operations, and by empowering employees to achieve strong results for Canadians and to contribute to a high-performing public service.

Risk Management

The Board recognizes that fostering an environment of innovation and continuous improvement involves risk-taking. Risk, involving both internal and external factors, can also influence the Board's ability to achieve its objectives.

To mitigate risk, the Board encourages members and staff to identify opportunities to improve its operations and service delivery. Staff participate in risk awareness and assessment sessions in their units, and evaluate risks for any new initiatives. Members contribute through feedback, professional development seminars and regular meetings. The Board's approach encourages a risk awareness culture and involves engagement across the organization.

As part of its corporate planning process, the Board conducts an annual strategic risk awareness and assessment session to identify and understand uncertainties that may have an impact on its objectives. By identifying and monitoring risks, the Board ensures that it proactively manages the potential events that could affect its ability to achieve its mandate. The Board has identified risk in four areas:

- Service Delivery and Program

There is a risk that the Board will not be able to meet the demands for timely and transparent service delivery.

The Board is responding to this risk by working with representatives to improve the scheduling process, and providing training to members and staff to ensure decisions and correspondence are written in plain language. The Board is also publishing its decisions online so that Veterans and Canadians can see how it is applying the law in individual cases.

- Human Resources

There is a risk that frequent changes in the membership as well as staff departures may affect the Board's ability to sustain a workforce with the necessary skills and competencies.

The Board is dealing with this risk by maintaining a pool of qualified candidates and communicating the need for members to the Minister. It is also creating pools to fill staff positions, and focusing on staff development through career training, assignment opportunities and learning plans.

- Reputational

There is a risk that negative public reaction to the Board's performance, audits, reports or decision making will undermine confidence in its ability to fulfill its mandate.

The Board is mitigating this risk by publishing decisions and more information on its website, and meeting with stakeholders to inform them about the Board's program and work.

- Financial

There is a risk that the Board's ability to respond to increasing requirements, demands and expectations may lead to funding shortfalls.

The Board is managing this risk by prioritizing its workload, closely monitoring its budget and expenditures, and making internal reallocations as necessary.

Our Priorities

The Board has developed new strategic priorities to help it serve Veterans better by building on its accomplishments and addressing its challenges. It will pursue these priorities through a number of initiatives. These initiatives, and others to be identified in annual business plans, will be implemented over the next five years.

Priority 1 Excellence in Service Delivery

Service excellence is a key priority. The Board's service management strategy outlines its commitment and plans to ensure better and more efficient design and delivery of services.

Objectives are as follows:

- Maximize the use of technology to provide high quality service and achieve operational efficiency.
- Continue to gather feedback from applicants, Veterans' organizations and other stakeholders, to identify opportunities for improvement and communication.
- Focus on consistency in decision making through ongoing training, support structures and performance feedback.
- Work with representatives to identify flexible scheduling practices that benefit applicants.

Priority 2 High-Performing Organization

The Board's ability to achieve its objectives depends largely on the skills and dedication of its members and staff. The Board must maintain a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce, supported by strong leadership that values and engages members and staff in delivering excellent service to applicants.

Through strong leadership, innovation and a commitment to openness and engagement, the Board will support individuals and give them the tools and training to contribute to the organization's success. It will invest time and resources in learning activities and provide members and staff with developmental opportunities.

Objectives are as follows:

- Support employee excellence and build a high performing organization by practicing excellence in organizational and human resources management.
- Provide continuous learning opportunities.
- Foster a work environment that promotes innovation, engagement and continuous improvement.
- Cultivate and sustain a healthy and supportive work culture that supports the well-being of all employees.

Priority 3 **Transparency and Accountability**

The Board will continue to implement measures that promote an environment of transparency and accountability.

The Board will ensure excellence, effectiveness and compliance with government-wide initiatives and accountabilities.

Objectives are as follows:

- Publication of decisions and information about the Board's decision-making and operations.
- Adoption of standardized procedures and forms.
- Increased outreach to stakeholders.