

Conservatives continue to fail Canadian Veterans

Dear editor:

In the past decade, Canada has lost more men and women in uniform to suicide than we did in Afghanistan. 14% of those who served there have been clinically diagnosed with a mental disorder linked to the mission. Those somber statistics are a reminder of why it is so critical to provide those who serve and those who have served the care and support they need.

Yet a recent Auditor General's report is only the latest evidence that this Conservative government has failed to uphold our country's sacred obligation to those who put their lives at risk to serve our country.

It confirmed that our veterans cannot get timely access to the mental health services. One in five had to wait up to eight months for help. 128 had to wait three to seven years to find out if they even qualified for mental health benefits. Veterans had to deal with these inexcusable delays on top of the stigma of mental illness that makes it so difficult to come forward and ask for help.

Furthermore, the Veterans Affairs department was found to be largely unconcerned with how well veterans were being served. The system is still too "complex and time-consuming," according to the Auditor General.

The Canadian Armed Forces have similar challenges. Years of austerity and mismanagement meant the Department only recently started hiring up to 54 psychiatrists and other mental health professionals needed to help with the scars of the Afghanistan mission—a need first identified a decade ago.

At the eleventh hour before the release of Auditor General report, the Conservatives made an announcement to head off this scathing criticism. Later it was revealed that these funds would be spread out over 50 years, further reinforcing the lack of credibility of Veterans Minister Julian Fantino, who once suggested that some veterans were "dupes".

Mr. Fantino oversaw the doubling of the health insurance premiums that veterans on fixed incomes pay; he closed nine department offices across the country, forcing some veterans to drive for hours to receive service. And he could not justify why these services were cut when his department has left over \$1 billion unspent since 2006. The hapless Mr. Fantino even suggested he still had access to those funds, which he doesn't—as even his own Parliamentary Secretary admitted.

Our troops and veterans are genuine heroes. They have stood ready to give their all; when they come home, their country must stand ready for them. We must uphold our social covenant with those who serve and their families, and give them nothing less than the best of care and support from a grateful nation.

Frank Valeriote, MP

Liberal Party of Canada Veterans Affairs Critic