

THE ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION'S ACTION PLAN TO PREVENT AND ERADICATE VETERANS' HOMELESSNESS

"Leave the streets behind"
2020-2025



SECTION 1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 FOREWORD

The Royal Canadian Legion Operation: Leave the Streets Behind began in Ontario Command as a result of being approached by a Veteran of the Korean War to assist in conducting the first ever Homeless Veterans' Remembrance Service in November, 2009.

The success of this Service brought forward the necessity to review the need for a national Homeless Veterans Program. At the Dominion Command Convention in 2012, held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a motion was made to extend this Homeless Veterans program at the National level as "Leave the Streets Behind".

The Royal Canadian Legion's Action Plan to Prevent & Eradicate Veterans' Homelessness "Leave the Streets Behind" is a joint partnership with Dominion Command, Provincial Commands, the OSI Special Section, Branches, Ladies Auxiliaries and external partners. It aligns with the federal government commitment to increase support to Veterans, to increase social infrastructure support, and to ensure that all Canadians have access to affordable housing. This Action Plan builds on past initiatives undertaken by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), the VAC-Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) 2013 Partnership Strategy to Address Veteran Homelessness, and the 2012-2014 VAC-ESDC Pilot Project on Veteran Homelessness. It is informed by research and evidence-based best practices that have been proven to address homelessness among Veterans.

The Action Plan will rely upon consultation with federal, provincial and municipal partners, both government and non-government, as well as national and local Veterans/Homelessness advocates. It relies on collaboration and strong partnership among all

stakeholders and with experts in the field. It also recognizes the importance of expanding the existing body of knowledge on Veterans' Homelessness in order to refine outreach strategies, target prevention activities, and develop Veteran-centric interventions against the backdrop of a strong evidence base.

1.2 THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

To "prevent and eradicate Veterans' Homelessness" does not suggest that the Royal Canadian Legion will never again witness homeless Veterans. Some Veterans may choose to remain homeless despite repeated offers of assistance and housing. The goal of "preventing and eradicating Veterans' Homelessness" does mean that a well-coordinated and efficient system must be in place to ensure that every Veteran has access to the necessary support to avoid living on the street and the ability to make timely movement to permanent housing. The Action Plan, therefore, must be a revolving cycle that will require periodic updating.

Successful implementation will mean that the Royal Canadian Legion, in consultation with our partners, will have the capacity to:

- **Quickly identify** and engage Veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness and after Verification of Service, take the necessary steps to coordinate assistance for the Veteran and his/her family;
- **Intervene** to prevent the loss of housing and divert Veterans from entering homelessness;
- **Work** with shelter and crisis services, to provide immediate needs for the Veteran and;
- **Quickly connect** Veterans to housing assistance and services – tailored to their unique needs and strengths – to help them achieve and maintain stable housing.

1.3 THE CAUSES OF VETERANS' HOMELESSNESS

Veterans become homeless as the result of complex and interrelated issues such as health status (physical and mental), personal problems, employment instability, poverty, lack of affordable housing, and an inability to access services, support and social assistance. In addition, many Veterans have been exposed to traumatic and dangerous situations as a result of their military service and often struggle with the after-effects. More so, some Veterans find the transition from military to civilian life difficult, and struggle to find ways to adjust to the civilian world. Lack of planning when making the transition from military to civilian life is a major factor.

1.4 MEASURING THE PROBLEM

Accurately measuring the number of homeless Veterans is very challenging. Many times the question is being asked “How many homeless Veterans are there in Canada?” Simply put the answer is unknown. They must self-identify and their service verified before they become a part of the program. Many times homeless people are in transit moving from place to place and are therefore difficult to count. There are also the so-called “hidden homeless” (i.e. those who are “couch surfing” and those at risk of becoming homeless) who are often not captured in these formalized counts. Finally, there are those homeless individuals who identify as Veterans in an illegal attempt to garner financial assistance from the Royal Canadian Legion. Care must be applied to ensure these individuals do not obtain assistance and reduce our limited financial resources.

1.5 DEFINITIONS

Absolute Homelessness

Absolute Homelessness is defined where an individual or family has no permanent housing and is staying at a temporary shelter. The temporary shelter could be doorways, empty buildings, abandoned vehicles, parks or beach common areas.

Near Homelessness

An individual or family are on the brink of losing their present living quarters, due to lack of payment of rent, heat and hydro, etc.

At Risk Homelessness

An individual who is dependent on others for housing, who is couch surfing, and whose personal or economic situation has changed.

Transitional Housing

Many programs with Transitional Housing are two years in length and the client is obligated to maintain consistency in attending and being involved in the various rehabilitation programs. Transitional Housing eventually leads to permanent and one must complete programs that lead to being permanently housed.

Permanent Housing

Permanent Housing is the first and most important part of our needs for the Homeless Veterans program. We continue to seek partners to establish Permanent Housing. Developers in Ontario have come forward to provide apartments. Outside organizations such as Mainstay Housing (Toronto) and Multifaith Housing (Ottawa) have stepped to the plate to fulfill the need for permanent housing.

It has been noted that incentives are being offered to developers by municipalities and the Legion needs to seek out these developers to ensure affordable housing for Veterans is included in their new builds.

NOTE: It must also be kept in mind that families of homeless Veterans can also be affected as they often endure the most of emotional, physical and financial abuse because of a Veteran's addictions and often leads to the family leaving the Veteran.

SECTION 2 | THE APPROACH

2.1 OUR MISSION

“To serve Veterans, which includes Serving Military and RCMP members and their families, to promote remembrance and to serve our communities and our country.”

2.2 OUR VISION

“Our vision is to be the most highly respected Veteran and Community Service organization.”

2.3 OUR AIM

“To prevent and eradicate Veterans’ homelessness.”

2.4 THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Guiding Principles for this Action Plan are provided to us in the Veterans Affairs Canada strategy and culture of Care, Compassion and Respect.

Thus, to ensure success, the Action Plan must:

- be Veteran-centric,
- be collaboration led,
- be evidence-informed,
- be outcome-based; and
- support the Legion’s overall Mission, Vision and Strategic Plan.

2.5 THE THEMES OF APPROACH

The Themes of Approach, in turn, are driven by the Guiding Principles and identify the Action Plan’s seven Strategic Objectives:

THEMES OF APPROACH		STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE
LEAD and ENGAGE	Improve Collaboration and Leadership	1. Through strong and visible leadership, strengthen existing relationships and develop and leverage new partnerships across all like-agencies to prevent and eradicate Veteran homelessness.
		2. Increase knowledge about homeless Veterans, the factors that lead to homelessness among Veterans, and successful initiatives that prevent and eradicate homelessness and support Veterans in Crisis.
FIND	Improve Outreach and Identification	3. Strengthen the capacity of the Royal Canadian Legion and work with its partners to identify and connect with homeless Veterans.
ASSIST	Improve Mechanism to Assist homeless Veterans	4. Strengthen the capacity of the Royal Canadian Legion and work with its partners to provide effective crisis response to homeless Veterans.
		5. Increase access to stable and affordable housing for Veterans.
PREVENT	Prevent Veterans’ homelessness	6. Facilitate the successful military to civilian transition and inspire Veterans to achieve their optimal well-being.
		7. Expand and enhance initiatives to rapidly identify and better support Veterans who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

2.6 STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND KEY RESULT AREAS

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1:

Strong and visible leadership

Strong leadership is required at all levels of the Royal Canadian Legion Commands and Branches in order to ensure the passion, talent, energy and resources brought by all stakeholders are efficiently and effectively resourced and brought to bear on the problem of Veteran homelessness. While there are excellent relations that already exist between our government and non-governmental partners, much more can be done to enhance coordination and ensure information and ideas are rapidly shared to leverage available resources and address identified gaps in services. This will facilitate faster implementation, so that results can be achieved without unnecessary delay.

Key Result Areas:

- Educate the public and our service delivery partners on the scope, causes and costs of Veteran homelessness, and ensure that Veterans issues are understood as part of the wider response to homelessness;
- Increase collaboration at the National, Provincial and Branch levels with established partners and stakeholders as well as other homeless organizations, to better define roles, share information and knowledge, and develop strong and enduring processes to assist homeless Veterans;
- Re-establish the Royal Canadian Legion Veterans' Homelessness Advisory Committee with the previously established stakeholders;
- Engage with Veteran stakeholders on local initiatives; and
- Guidelines for establishing a Homeless Veterans program in each Command (province) have been developed and distributed to Commands.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2:

Increase knowledge about Veterans' homelessness

Over the past few years, information has emerged about the homeless Veteran population. However, to more effectively combat this issue, a more accurate portrait of this population is needed. The availability of data on the situation of homeless Veterans, evidence on the effectiveness of initiatives undertaken, and knowledge of the factors that lead to homelessness among Veterans are key to addressing this issue. Knowing or being able to predict the causes of Veteran homelessness improves the odds of being able to design effective interventions. The most effective initiatives for ending homelessness have been proven to be evidence-based. These rely on timely and accurate data in order to measure their effectiveness and success, and to enable the ability required to rapidly adapt these initiatives if required.

Key Result Areas:

- Increase education and collaboration with partners at the Branch, Provincial Command, OSI Special Section and Dominion Command to identify and share best practices to address the issue;
- Establish metrics to ensure effective services and supports are provided;
- Work with CIMVHR research academics and others to identify gaps in research and help determine the factors that lead to Veteran homelessness; and
- Increase our activities to ensure that the Royal Canadian Legion is the recognized advocate for homeless Veterans at the National, Provincial and Branch levels.

NOTE: Statistics must be collected, shared and distributed on a regular and timely manner.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3:**Strengthen our capacity to identify and connect with homeless Veterans**

It is critical that the Royal Canadian Legion effectively reaches out and identifies Veterans who are homeless so that support and services can be provided. However, identification can be challenging, given the very nature of what it means to live on the streets and many homeless Veterans are very likely to be disengaged, isolated and mistrustful. Conventional means of connecting such by phone or email are many times non-effective as many have no fixed address and lack access to the required technology. Even verification of military service can sometimes be a long process, as many Veterans may be missing identification documentation or forgotten details such as their military service number. Accordingly, many do not self-identify to the Service Bureaus and, for those that do, establishing and maintaining contact is difficult. Therefore, a more proactive approach at the Provincial and Branch levels is required whereby Service Officers and local community partner organizations work collaboratively to better find, identify, track and engage homeless Veterans.

Key Result Areas:

- Increase collaboration, communication and efficiency of outreach initiatives by all stakeholders at the Provincial and Branch levels;
- Improve efficiency and timeliness of process of verification of military service;
- Study other processes to more effectively identify and assist homeless Veterans; and
- Share findings and stats with all organizations involved.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4:**Strengthen our capacity to provide effective crisis response.**

The Royal Canadian Legion will assist Veterans who are homeless by providing access to the services

and support that address their needs. This will help to either prevent them from becoming homeless, or if they are, give them the necessary support to facilitate their entry into longer-term programs that ultimately lead to a more stable and secure lifestyle.

Key Result Areas:

- Advocate ways to expand the current eligibility criteria for VAC's programs and services to help enable homeless Veterans to get the help they need;
- Collaborate with other government departments and stakeholder organizations on initiatives that will provide evidence and best practices to expand services and programs that help Veterans who are homeless or in crisis; and
- Liaison with Transition Groups.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5:**Increase access to stable and affordable housing for Veterans**

In addition to needing clinical supports to deal with their addictions and physical/mental health problems, most homeless Veterans and those in crisis need access to stable and affordable housing. Even with social and financial assistance provided from other sources, such as provincial or municipal programs and services, the amount of funding provided is often insufficient to maintain a very basic lifestyle, as a large percentage of income is dedicated to housing with little remaining for other necessities such as food, clothing or transportation.

Key Result Areas:

- Provide financial assistance and support to Veterans who are homeless;
- Provide financial assistance to organizations that expand the supply of affordable, permanent housing for Veterans; and
- Seek funding support from the Legion National Foundation.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 6:**Facilitate the successful military to civilian transition and inspire Veterans to achieve their optimal well-being**

Research has shown that homeless Veterans often report poor transition and this was a major factor in the path that led them to homelessness. Hence, it is logical that enhancing the transition experience will reduce the factors and circumstances that lead to homelessness in the first instance. A positive transition experience helps ensure stable employment/sufficient income that provides the necessities of life for Veterans and their families. An improved military to civilian transition would include an efficient and seamless transition of medical treatment information and supports from the military medical system to the provincial system, and linkages to community support systems for the Veteran and family, including mental health and/or additional supports. Ultimately, a successful transition maintains or enhances the well-being of Veterans and families, reducing or eliminating risk factors for homelessness and poor quality of life and helps inspire Veterans to affect positive changes in their own lives.

Key Result Areas:

- Optimize support to Veterans' families through Poppy Funds and local, Legion and non-Legion, financial resources; and
- Re-establish the Royal Canadian Legion Veterans' Homelessness Advisory Committee with the previously established stakeholders.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 7:**Expand and enhance initiatives to rapidly identify and better support Veterans who come into contact with the criminal justice system**

Ensure assistance is available to all Veterans who come into contact with the criminal justice system;

AND

Ensure all incarcerated Veterans are afforded necessary treatment programs while in custody, and that suitable housing is available for them upon release.

Key Result Areas:

- Develop and implement a model, at the Branch level, for collaboration with local police services and other first responders to coordinate outreach and identification efforts and to facilitate homeless Veterans' use of the Legion's services; and
- Enhance pre-release transition services for incarcerated Veterans to include access to safe and affordable housing.

NOTE: VAC has initiated pilot Criminal Justice programs in Nova Scotia and Alberta. Ontario Command is also working on development of a similar program. It must also be noted that the responsibility for internal treatment programs while incarcerated has yet to be determined.

SECTION 3 | CONCLUSION

Canada and the Royal Canadian Legion owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those who willingly put their lives on the line to defend our freedom and values, and to help make our country what it is today. It is disheartening that in a nation as rich as Canada, men and women who have served their country now find themselves struggling to attain the very basic necessities of life – including a place they can call home. While progress has been made, more work needs to be done to reach out and support Homeless Veterans and those in crisis or at risk of homelessness. One thing is certain: *it is unacceptable for any Veteran to face Homelessness in Canada.*

The ultimate goal of “Leave the Streets Behind” is to prevent and eradicate Veteran homelessness in Canada. While it may be naïve to think that there will never again be Canadian Veterans without a place to call home, the objectives outlined in this Action Plan will ensure that these situations are atypical. Should any Veteran find him or herself homeless, the Royal Canadian Legion must ensure that the necessary support is in place to make the experience short-lived and non-recurring. To do less will mean we are failing to meet our organization’s Mission and Vision Statement.