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Office of the Veterans Ombudsman – Spouses Supporting Transition Executive Summary

Prepared for the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman

Supplier name: Earnscliffe Strategy Group

Contract number: 51019-184022/001/CY

Contract value: \$14,972.50

Award date: Oct 10th, 2018

Delivery date: Nov 30th, 2018

Registration number: POR # 056-18

For more information on this report, please contact the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman at:
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November 2018

This public opinion research report presents the results of the focus group conducted by Earnscliffe Strategy Group on behalf of Office of the Veterans Ombudsman. The research was conducted in November.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Le Soutien Des Conjoint(e)s Durant La Transition

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Catalogue Number:
V104-20/2019E-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN):
978-0-660-30260-7

Related publications (registration number: POR # 056-18):

V104-20/2019F-PDF (Final Report, French)
ISBN 978-0-660-30261-4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earnscliffe is pleased to present this report to the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) summarizing the results of the qualitative research on spouses supporting transition.

In November 2017, the OVO published a research study which identified that spouses were noted as the greatest source of support for transitioning members. To better understand the lived experience of spouses of Veterans during the transition, the OVO wanted to conduct qualitative research with spouses who self-identified as having successfully transitioned.

This follow-up work aimed to provide insight into the unique and shared experiences of those who support Veterans during transition. The specific areas of focus included: the role of the spouse during transition from military to civilian life; formal and informal supports; preparing for transition and defining success; and, the effect on the spousal relationship. The results of this research will be used to support OVO's ongoing work on transition, especially as it relates to: benefits for Canadian Veterans and their families, inform service providers and contribute to ongoing research efforts on transition.

To meet these objectives, the OVO organized a one-day discussion group in Ottawa on November 14, 2018. The target audience for the group was spouses of Canadian Veterans (18+) medically released between 2006 and 2016 that self-identified as having successfully transitioned.

The OVO took responsibility for all of the logistics including identifying, inviting and scheduling participants. In total, seven spouses, all women, participated from different parts of the country including: Newfoundland, Ontario and British Columbia. The OVO made arrangements to have the spouses travel to Ottawa for the session and covered all of their related travel expenses. The one-day session began at 8:30 am and ended at 4:00 pm with three 30-minute breaks and lunch.

Earnscliffe was responsible for input into the discussion guide, the provision of bilingual facilitation, analysis and reporting (of the Executive Summary and Methodology Report). The total cost of our contribution was \$14,972.50 including HST.

For the purposes of this report, it is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn, and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

The key findings from the research are presented below. Please note that participants in the discussion group were referred to as “participants” in this report, while their Veteran husbands (those who transitioned) were referred to as “spouses”.

- **Though participants had self-identified as having successfully transitioned, the characterization of their transitions as “successful” felt like an overstatement to most.** Generally, participants described having “come out the other side” of their transitions which they felt was the minimum or a base level of success. They were very quick to point out that success was still a work in progress and that there was still much to do and to overcome to be truly successful.
- **The reason all of the participants struggled with the characterization of a successful transition was because each of them described their transition as stressful and challenging.** Participants shared very personal, emotional and difficult stories about their spouses’ transitions and the impact that those transitions had on their (own personal and family’s) lives.
- **Most participants described their spouses’ transitions as a period of time in which they were in “survival mode”;** not knowing what to expect from any of the concerned parties: their spouses; the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF); or, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC).
- Asked to describe the challenges they faced during their spouses’ transitions, responses clustered around the following themes:
 - **Their spouses’ loss of identity and sense of purpose.** This was one of the most surprising and difficult challenges they faced – one that permeated almost every facet of their lives. Participants empathized with their husbands’ struggles with self-doubt and feelings of emasculation. There was also a practical dimension in that participants spoke of having to “parent” their spouse after transition. They explained that without the structure of the military, where everything was essentially organized for them, their spouses were not sure how to function as civilians. This put a new and unexpected burden on participants’ shoulders.
 - **The unexpected financial volatility.** All described there being a significant financial impact of transition, particularly given the unexpected lag between their last salary payment (in the CAF) and their first pension payment (through VAC). Participants were surprised that this was not a more coordinated transition especially given the lead up time to their retirement. This was a challenge for which they were unprepared. Most had not made necessary arrangements to weather the transition financially and spoke of having to use their savings; dip into their RRSPs; borrow from family; move in with family; and, take on extra work, etc. to make the ends meet.
 - **The lack of communication.** There was a widespread sense that there was a general lack of communication and follow-through before and after transition. Participants complained that information was generally communicated directly to their spouses, who often did not convey the information to them. They also complained of difficulties obtaining information (as the spouse of a veteran) and receiving unclear and/or conflicting information from VAC about supports available to Veterans. Given the leadership role these participants were playing in the transition, being left out of important communications unnecessarily exacerbated their challenge and increased their stress.

- **Being abandoned by CAF.** Participants tended to be shocked at how swift and clean the break was with CAF and described feeling unwelcome on the base after their transitions and feeling as though the CAF had closed the doors on them. Participants had difficulty navigating the systems, whether CAF, VAC or civilian life and were surprised by the lack of coordination between CAF and VAC. The sense of being abandoned by the support system that they had so heavily relied upon for years had an isolating impact on them and compounded the effect of the stresses of the new doubt and uncertainty related to dealing with VAC and navigating civilian life.
- **These unexpected, unnecessary stresses affected Veterans’ mental health.** The ordeal of transition, including navigating these challenges, adversely affected their spouses’ mental health. Indeed, in some cases, participants explained that their spouses’ struggles with mental health had more to do with trying to navigate the system, and dealing with the refusal of benefits, than it did with their time spent in service.
- There were three specific irritants worth noting that contributed to these challenges:
 - **The barrier of stigma.** Stigma associated with their spouses’ release was definitely something that participants had to face as part of their spouses’ transition. Participants spoke of being unable to discuss their husbands’ or their family’s situation for fear of triggering negative consequences. Some described their husbands as uncomfortable talking about their feelings, even though that was precisely what they needed to do. Typically, the reason was that the Veteran was afraid of being penalized professionally and/or personally for being “weak.” Some worried about the risk of losing essential benefits if their husband’s health condition was known. From the civilian perspective, participants talked about the stigma civilians have that transitioned military personnel are taking advantage of the system (i.e., receiving a pension, possibly benefits, and working in a second career).
 - **Having to urgently decide on major changes.** There was a sense that some of the timelines to make important and significant decisions about their new civilian lives were tight. Participants spoke about having only one year to make fundamental, life-altering decisions, at a time when (given their spouses were medically released) they were otherwise focused. The most important of these decisions were related to assistance finding employment and relocation benefits. For example, a number of participants spoke about having no time to do anything but settle for living in an area (home, city and/or province) that was not their first choice because of the deadline to take advantage of the relocation benefit.
 - **Poorly staged and executed briefings.** While those transitioning to civilian life were provided with information leading up to their releases (SCAN seminars), participants raised a number of concerns with these meetings:
 - The seminars were often conducted too far in advance of their spouses’ release date which meant the information was easily forgotten;
 - There was so much information presented that it was overwhelming at the time; and,
 - The seminar was conducted in a large group setting, and not one-on-one; although, one participant did have a one-on-one meeting that lasted only 10 minutes.

- **There seemed to be a heavier reliance on informal supports than formal supports.** When asked what or who was their greatest source of support during the transition process, the majority of participants tended to raise informal supports top of mind.
 - **Family and friends** were an important support for many participants; particularly those with military histories or backgrounds who understood the lifestyle and how to navigate the system.
 - Participants also often raised their **faith**, members of the clergy, the Chaplains, and, Padres as an important source of support. Participants explained that the Padres were a particularly important source of support because they understand the military life but are not part of the chain of command.
 - Some participants mentioned the importance of **hobbies** their husbands had taken up, such as physical exercise (MMA and biking); guitar lessons; and, motorcycle riding.
 - The influence of **pets** was also raised spontaneously by a number of participants. Dogs were felt to be particularly helpful because in addition to the unconditional love they provide, they require attention (i.e. feeding and walks) that proved an effective motivator to get some spouses up and out of the house.
- **Formal supports were invisible, confusing, and inconsistently granted.** The most important challenge seemed to be around a lack of awareness (and poor communication) about the available supports and conflicting information about eligibility. Many participants explained that they had been turned away many times for a benefit to which they felt they were entitled and that they had learned, over time, to keep applying. Those who had successfully found a benefit, said that they had found it haphazardly on the advice of one their informal supports (i.e., members of the clergy, friends, family, etc.).
- **Most did not have strong relationships with their VAC case worker and felt that they were too few in number, overworked and stressed themselves.** The few who had had a positive experience with a case worker, praised them for listening, dealing with them on a human level, giving it to them straight, caring, and being proactive.
- **Participants' roles through transition and post transition were/are all-encompassing.** The majority indicated that they were primarily responsible for all of the household chores. While most participants explained that prior to transition, their spouses had been contributing to share the household and childrearing responsibilities, their spouses were now only capable of getting up and going to work every day.
- **Transition adversely impacted the careers and aspirations of participants.** Some were required to leave their jobs to care for their husbands full-time, while others were required to get jobs to support their families. Most felt that their careers had been limited either by the transition or by the fact they were a military wife; the need to move every few years was a career limiting factor for most.
- **To meet the demands on their time, especially those working full-time, some participants had taken advantage of VIP services offered through VAC for support managing household chores, shovelling the driveway, mowing the lawn, etc.** Indeed, there seemed to have been a little more awareness of this VAC support; other than perhaps counselling support. A few participants were receiving VIP support and others had applied and were waiting for a determination. Worth noting, there were fewer complaints associated with this particular benefit, those who were currently using it described it as a fairly easy application process with quick turnaround time.

- **Most felt that critical objectives for a truly successful and satisfactory transition were not yet achieved.** As described above, participants described their “successful” transitions as a work in progress, with critical objectives not yet met. When asked to define “successful transitions”, participants spoke about:
 - the desire to have an **enduring relationship** with their spouse;
 - **health** (both mentally and physically);
 - **financial stability**;
 - **being happily employed**;
 - **open communication** with their spouses but also a desire for their spouses to be able to speak openly about their experiences;
 - **having a support network**; and,
 - **a sense of purpose** (i.e., goals and dreams).

- **Finally, it is important to note, participants were very appreciative of having been given this opportunity to gather to have an open, candid and non-judgmental conversation about their experiences.** Most came away feeling that they could have benefited from an experience like this during the transition. Not only did they describe it as cathartic to be able to talk openly and freely, many came away having learned something from the experiences of others that they thought could help them navigate the system.

POLITICAL NEUTRALITY STATEMENT

Research Firm:

Earnscliffe Strategy Group Inc. (Earnscliffe)
Contract Number: 51019-184022/001/CY

Contract award date: October 19, 2018

I hereby certify as a Representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed: 

Date: November 30, 2018

Stephanie Constable
Principal, Earnscliffe