

MINUTES

**NATIONAL LABOUR-MANAGEMENT CONSULTATION COMMITTEE (NLMCC)
VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
and
THE UNION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS' EMPLOYEES (UVAE)**

Thursday, September 26, 2013

Chairperson:

Mary Chaput, Deputy Minister, VAC

In attendance:

UVAE

Yvan Thauvette

Kim Coles

Debi Buell

Michelle Bradley

Daniel Allard

Jayne Auranen

Bonnie Heidt

Pat Mason

Ray Bailey

Anne Howard

Marney Lacroix (observer)

Management:

Mary Chaput

John Larlee

Keith Hillier

Charlotte Stewart

Janice Burke

Don Love

Charlotte Bastien

Rachel Gravel

David Robinson

Cuyla Thompson

1. Welcoming Remarks

As the Chairperson, the Deputy Minister opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the table. She also recognized that this was an opportunity to have a full discussion and give time to the items that need to be discussed.

The Deputy Minister recognized Keith Hillier, ADM of Service Delivery (SD), who will be retiring shortly with 42 years of service in the Public Service after starting his career as a CR-04 and ending it as an ADM. She noted that this would be his last meeting, and that he has been a management member at the consultation committee for quite a number of years and a key player within our Department and across government. She stated that he will not only be missed by everyone as a colleague but also as a friend.

The Deputy Minister also addressed a number of key initiatives ongoing within VAC, including the Ste Anne's Hospital Transfer, the final wave of reductions at VAC and the stress it has caused on employees, and the excellent collaboration between the union and the Department in supporting employees and ensuring that the reductions were rolled out in as positive of a manner as was feasible. She stated that the challenges and fiscal pressures will continue, and it is important for everyone to search for more efficient ways to do business and to raise issues with initiatives that may not be working. She advised the union that this is where their views are so important.

Y. Thauvette stated that he agrees that there have been difficulties and that the union is not against transformation and modernization; however, they are against and will continue to contest the contracting out of services that are provided by Public Service employees and employees at VAC. He stated that the employer may think that there are savings with contracting out, but it is not the case, and it comes with a reduction in service to clients. The union understands that when there is a reduction in work then a reduction in positions will follow, but the union will not support reductions resulting from work being moved to private companies.

He also raised concerns with comments by the Treasury Board Minister regarding employees taking too much sick leave and not meeting the appropriate standard of performance. He believes that this is just another opening for the elimination of further jobs. He stated that the government is not acting in the best interest of employees, and that this will be evident during the next round of negotiations when the unions are going to work together.

The Chair of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), stated in his opening remarks that he was pleased to be included in these meetings and to hear the union's comments. He indicated that his Department has a good working relationship with the union and he hopes that this will continue.

2. Approval of Minutes and Review of Follow-up Items from April 17, 2013

Minutes approved with minor change to Item #2 where the wrong date is noted.

The union asked whether the Deputy Minister or the ADM SD have visited the Sydney office. Neither had, but the Deputy Minister advised that they would keep this request in mind.

The union also asked whether employees would be receiving the new ultra light tablets. The ADM SD indicated that two devices were piloted and that the result is that the ultra light notebooks are preferred. The notebooks will be rolled out as IT infrastructures are updated.

Action Item: DG of Field Operations to send K. Coles the schedule for roll out of the ultra light notebooks.

The union enquired on the client satisfaction survey, and the ADM SD advised that there has been no survey and there are no plans to launch one; however, various indicators are being used to measure client satisfaction including complaints to the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO), ministerial mail, visits to the Legion conventions and boards, and the media.

The union raised concerns with the lack of a client survey, and asked that management share with them the indicators. They also stated that with the changes to the work descriptions in OVO, only investigations regarding systemic issues are being carried out.

Action Item: ADM SD to share the OVO report and trend analysis used as indicators for client satisfaction.

Action Item: DG of Human Resources (HR) to follow up with Classification on whether OVO Work Descriptions changed.

The union asked whether there were any other committees to discuss Medavie issues. The ADM SD advised that the only committee he is aware of is the CSA Workload Committee. There was a report produced within the last month.

Action Item: ADM SD to provide Y. Thauvette with the CSA-UVAE Working Committee report.

Action Item: ADM SD to follow-up on whether there are any other committees dealing with Medavie issues.

3. Branch Updates

a) Human Resources and Corporate Services (HRCS)

The ADM Human Resources and Corporate Services (HRCS) stated that the major focus for her Branch recently has been Wave 3. She thanked the union for their support, and indicated that the DGHR has advised her that the union's involvement has assisted his team in sorting through key issues.

She indicated that she is looking at reshaping HRCS as the Branch will be losing key people and will be looking to mentorship and coaching for knowledge and skill transfer. The HR Division will also be focusing on the implementation of the Performance Management Program for all employees which will require everyone's participation.

b) Service Delivery (SD)

The ADM SD indicated that over the next three months he will be taking stock of his branch following Wave 3 and looking at what resource allocations and structural and process changes will need to be made.

He stated that SD continues to look at reengineering its processes including hearing loss claims and other single injury low risk claims, while more complicated claims will be left to a more experienced group.

SD currently has three vacant DG positions with various ongoing processes to staff them. They will be filled or plans to fill them will be in place prior to his departure.

Y. Thauvette indicated that it would be great for UVAE to be advised of which offices need to reallocate resources. The ADM SD advised that they continue to work on the analysis and the CSA Workload Intensity tool is going to be a big piece of the analysis. Y. Thauvette stated that there are certain aspects of the CSA jobs that are not being taken into consideration, and that he believes the process to be flawed as the employer seems to be determining the number of jobs to cut before determining the amount of work that needs to be done. The ADM SD responded that the way of doing work amongst offices differs, and that the CSA Workload Working Group was tasked with coming to a reasonable consensus on what the CSAs should be doing. The pilot project is validating the findings.

B. Heidt stated that the CSAs were advised not to count widows as part of the Workload Intensity Tool, even though this is part of the CSA workload. She indicated that reality and the tool are not consistent, and that in some offices they are below their SERLO numbers and the work is not decreasing. The DG of Field Operations indicated that

there are different requirements for each group and, although the work relating to widows still needs to be accounted for, it has been removed from the Workload Intensity Tool as the work is not as intense as it is for other clients.

c) Policy, Communications and Commemoration (PCC)

The A/ADM Policy, Communications and Commemoration (PCC) stated that they recently held and filled the positions for the DG of Communications and the DG of Commemoration, which are both based in Charlottetown. In addition, the Director of Research now reports directly to the ADM PCC.

The branch is focusing on work life balance and K. Coles asked for examples. The A/ADM PCC stated that they are focusing on actions identified from the PSES Action Plan including learning. If people are more competent in their jobs, they are better equipped to deal with the workload. The Deputy Minister recognized that the staff in Policy Development is very busy and given this she has ensured that management is available to provide the required attention and support necessary.

K. Coles advised management that employees in Communications do not feel that they have any workload balance. The Deputy Minister recognized this and stated that, because the media never stops, this is, unfortunately, part of the work requirements in Communications.

Y. Thauvette asked whether Commemoration was planning initiatives to recognize the anniversaries of the two World Wars in Canada and abroad, to which the A/ADM PCC responded yes.

d) Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB)

The Chair of VRAB stated that they continue to be busy with a steady workload and, in the case of appeals, a higher intake than was forecasted. VRAB continues to make excellent progress on meeting service standards post-hearing, but have challenges in getting cases to hearing as new member appointments are pending.

He advised that work on the Business Process Redesign continues and that the next stage will be pre-hearing processes related to the preparation and content of the Statement of Case.

Recently, VRAB celebrated its 18th anniversary with an all staff meeting, where recognition rewards were presented, and a guest speaker addressed staff and members on work life balance. All staff meetings are held quarterly to update everyone on priorities, performance and general items of interest, with an educational component built in.

Y. Thauvette asked if there were any planned cuts, and the Chair of VRAB responded that there were no plans to make any cuts.

4. Transformation / Blueprint 2020

The DG of Strategic Coordination & Liaison (SCL) and Transformation stated that VAC is more than halfway through Transformation; however, closing a project does not mean that it is complete. Transformation is now moving from the project focus to looking at how the changes are working for our clients. Currently, Transformation is working on equipping managers so that employees are getting more timely information on the initiative.

The DG of SCL and Transformation advised that he is the Champion for Blueprint 2020 within VAC. He stated that this is an initiative of the Clerk of the Privy Council to engage employees in order to create a vision for the Public Service in 2020. Social media forums are available for employees to provide their input and managers are being encouraged to sit down and speak with employees.

Y. Thauvette advised that this is seen by unions as another work for cuts and renewal. The unions are asking their members to not participate. In addition, concerns were raised by a member that there was no translation during a teleconference on Blueprint 2020 with members of the Employment Equity groups.

Action: DG of SCL and Transformation to ensure that simultaneous translation is being provided for all working groups relating to Blueprint 2020.

The Deputy Minister stated that management views this as an opportunity to discuss the skills required in the Public Service in 2020, and that we need to encourage employees to enter the discussion. The DG of SCL and Transformation clarified that it is not about big changes, but the smaller ones that may not radically change the workplace but have an effect just the same.

K. Coles stated that management can give it any name they want, but it is just another initiative similar to those in the past such as PS2000 or Renewal where cuts were made right after the initiatives took place. Employees fear that this will happen yet again. The Deputy Minister responded that management can work to address the fear and skepticism, but the process is there in order to ensure that everyone gives thought to the skill sets needed to serve Canadians in 2020 and beyond.

5. a) Departmental Budget Update VAC

The ADM HRCS stated that balancing the budget is a main priority. VAC is managing new hires very carefully and Senior Management is meeting monthly to review all appointment decisions. Given the tight operating budget, management is looking at new ways to be flexible and setting priorities to see where we can allow for new initiatives. In addition, there has been a reduction of \$300,000 to travel and everyone is expected to carefully manage this.

Y. Thauvette asked whether each branch was within budget. The ADM HRCS responded that some were under and some were over and that currently we were seeing a slight deficit. The Deputy Minister stated that towards the end of the year there are usually some commitments that do not end up getting used which should mean that we are on track.

UVAE asked whether any new staffing was occurring and raised concerns with the ongoing use of casuals in certain locations, including Campbellton. The ADM HRCS indicated that every position is reviewed as departures take place, and decisions are made based on that review. The DG of Field Operations stated that in some cases casuals are being used where it is known that the position will not exist in the future, for instance in areas where office closures are taking place.

Action Item: DG of Regional Operations to look into use of casuals in Campbellton and other locations where long-term usage is occurring.

The DGHR stated that currently VAC is using terms and casuals in 7% of its positions, which is below the 10% benchmark, and that over the last 8 to 9 years the usage has been decreasing.

b) Departmental Budget Update VRAB

The Chair of VRAB reported that the budget situation is tight and that management is closely monitoring discretionary spending.

6. Ste. Anne's Hospital

The ADM HRCS advised that the negotiations are ongoing and remain a high priority for the Department. She stated that VAC is doing everything it can to move forward with the transfer while ensuring that the best possible care continues for the Veterans. The transfer agreement is close to being finalized and there are only a handful of items left to address. Once the agreement is complete and approved signatures will follow, which

will allow for implementation and full communications with employees. The transfer will not happen in 2013, nor does VAC have a date yet, but once one is confirmed it will be communicated.

The ADM HRCS also stated that VAC has confirmed that terms will be offered employment with the Province of Quebec.

The Deputy Minister stated that it is a complex file as it not only involves the negotiations, but the Hospital has to keep running. She stated that the union has played a key role.

The Executive Director of Ste. Anne's Hospital stated that this process has not been easy, and she thanks both the employees and the unions, particularly for their continued respect for Veterans.

UVAE raised a number of concerns, including that the employees are still waiting for a transfer date which has an effect on everyone, and that although the terms are happy to hear that they are getting an offer, the terms that have been there beyond two years will not be happy when they see the conditions of the offer as they should have been rolled over to indeterminate status and were not due to the freeze on term roll-overs. As terms are not subject to the conditions of the Workforce Adjustment Appendix (WFAA), they are not fully aware of what their offers will look like. The union further stated that they have been told that rolling the terms over to indeterminate is too expensive, but this will create differences among the entitlements between terms and indeterminates when they may have the same years of service. In addition, employees are leaving and there is no pool to replace them, leading to concerns with the level of service, the use of on call employees and overtime requirements.

The Deputy Minister stated that she appreciates the union's concerns. She stated that she respects people's choices, but she encourages term employees to consider the Hospital as a choice workplace. Attempts have been made to ensure that employment at the Hospital is preferred to other provincial positions. She realizes that they do not fall under the provisions of the WFAA.

The Executive Director of Ste. Anne's Hospital stated that she is aware that there have been departures, and that there are more to come on September 30, but that the Hospital and the unions need to work together to deal with the departures.

Y. Thauvette advised management that if they rolled the terms over to indeterminate status, they would be entitled to the provisions of the WFAA.

The Deputy Minister stated that as soon as there is more information it will be shared.

7. Directive on Travel, Hospitality, Conferences and Event Expenditures

The ADM HRCS advised that the Travel Directive was amended in August 2013, with a purpose of focussing on only necessary travel. The authority to approve travel has been raised to a higher level within VAC. The Directive encourages alternate ways to have meetings and to deliver and receive training. For instance, VAC needs to look at ways to bring training to the Regions and to look at videoconferencing as a more frequent option. Travel is not eliminated; it just needs to be more closely reviewed.

The ADM HRCS stated that within VAC management did recognize the need for Case Managers to move quickly, so Area Directors have been delegated to approve travel for Case Managers, and where there is short notice of travel requirements, email approval is appropriate. Other areas are also being looked at to ensure that everything is being managed efficiently, and a scan has indicated that there does not seem to be an increase in workload for Finance or much of an increase for administrative staff.

The ADM HRCS also advised that hospitality was under high scrutiny.

Y. Thauvette raised concerns with the reduction and the effect that this will have on the Case Managers' abilities to get to the clients, especially in light of the office closures. The ADM HRCS assured him that core business will definitely be supported and given priority.

K. Coles indicated that there have been issues identified in the field, for instance, IT travel was not approved where a printer needed to be fixed. The ADM HRCS advised the union to bring forward any issues as it will take a few months to get all issues with the process resolved.

8. Performance Management for All Employees

It was noted that the Associate Deputy Minister was not present at the consultation committee today as she was at a Deputy Head session on the new Performance Management Directive.

The DGHR explained that the new Directive on Performance Management comes into effect on April 1, 2014, and that it puts more rigour into the process and ensures that managers have a consistent process to follow for all employees. The manager is responsible for ensuring employees have clear work objectives and that everyone has a performance agreement in place.

Y. Thauvette stated that he is against performance appraisals and that he does not see the benefit of this new directive. If an employee is a good employee, he or she does not need a performance appraisal. He also raised concerns with the manner in which the directive was communicated. J. Auranen raised concerns that the service standards are being used for the goals and objectives in their performance agreements. Management agreed that they were two separate issues and that service standards should not be the goals and objectives of an individual employee.

The Deputy Minister and DGHR both stated that all employees are entitled to a performance agreement and a performance appraisal or ongoing feedback.

The DGHR indicated that mandatory online training for all managers and supervisors was rolled out on September 25 and will be complete by October 31, 2013.

The Deputy Minister closed the conversation by stating that hopefully at the next meeting, everyone will find that it has improved the workplace.

9. Resourcing Update / Labour Relations & OHE Resources

The DGHR opened this item by stating that VAC has been very active on alternations with strong union support. Currently, there are only 9 outstanding requests from opting employees, and that a large number would like to leave.

The ADM SD indicated that looking at the CSAs workload is a priority this fall and that CSAs would be staffed in some areas.

The DGHR advised that the two VAC mediators have been declared surplus, and as such, there will be no in-house services to provide Informal Conflict Management Services (ICMS). He stated that there are a number of options for continuing the services including EAP and its SOS services, and HR is looking into other options, as well.

Y. Thauvette stated that in some cases external services are preferred; however, with ICMS, it is imperative to have something at the grass roots level. The union indicated that there will likely be more grievances and harassment complaints if these services are not readily available. The DGHR clarified that the services will still be available, it will just be provided by a different party. The Deputy Minister assured UVAE that if a gap is identified it will be addressed.

10. Office Closure Notifications to Veterans and Public

The DG of Field Operations advised that eight offices will be closing prior to February 28, 2014. VAC plans on informing the Veterans, their families and other stakeholders of the closures and the plan for service continuation. The date of communication has not yet been set. As a result of opportunities, some people are already moving on to other positions or to retirement, which has already lead to a requirement to change and move case loads to other offices. When a client file is moved to another Case Manager there is a verbal communication, and the new Case Manager contacts the client to introduce him/herself.

The DG of Field Operations also explained that there are regular meetings with Service Canada in the areas where offices are slated to close and they are providing training to their staff to be ready to take on the work.

J. Auranen asked whether the NCCN will get copies of the letters in advance so that they are able to respond correctly to client enquiries. The DG of Field Operations responded that they will as per the process put in place in the spring.

Y. Thauvette asked what the access centre will look like and how the work will be done. The ADM SD responded that the renovations are complete and that the centre is physically ready to open. He also responded that the centre will not be doing case management, but will be open for general information, as a drop off centre, and as a meeting location for Case Managers who travel to Charlottetown to meet with clients.

K. Coles asked what group and level will be doing the intake. The DG of Field Operations responded that the Service Delivery Advisory Team (SDAT) will provide the intake.

Action Item: ADM SD to share the Classification level of the positions that will do the intake at the Charlottetown Access Centre.

11. Medavie Blue Cross Update

The ADM SD stated that a Request for Proposals has been published and that bids have been received for the new contract. The new FHCPS contract will include authorizations for all programs of choice. This will allow VAC to focus on core functions and complex client needs. TAC staff have been advised of this change.

12. Records Management

The DG of Field Operations advised that although VAC initially planned to centralize all client records in Kirkland Lake, the files will not be moved there. As per the Government

of Canada's direction for storage, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) is closing all of their storage facilities by March 2015 and, as such, VAC had to change its initial plan. VAC is in the process of contracting with a private company to provide storage services comparable to what LAC used to provide. VAC does have files currently stored with a private company, under Regional Standing Offers, but will be moving to a national contract.

Y. Thauvette noted that it is yet another situation of contracting out. He asked how many positions would be cut due to this. The ADM SD stated that this would not result in any further job cuts.

13. Pay in Arrears

Y. Thauvette asked the Deputy Minister to speak to Treasury Board Secretariat and ask them to extend the repayment to 2 years instead of only one year. UVAE also asked whether Ste. Anne's Hospital will be excluded from this.

Action Item: DGHR to follow up on whether Ste. Anne's Hospital will be included in the change to pay in Arrears.

14. ICE System

The DG of Field Operations advised that the ICE system and the training are being rolled out to Area Offices. She stated that managers have asked for guidelines around the use of the system and that in some cases, there are issues with the change in work habits associated with the system; for example, some people are forgetting to log in or log out.

UVAE raised concerns that the tool is being used for performance management in some offices. The DG of Field Operations responded that it is not the primary intent of the system; however, if issues are identified, it will be one of the tools used to assist an employee in bringing his or her performance up to level.

UVAE asked whether the IPSCs will receive ICE access. The DG of Field Operations responded that the infrastructure capabilities are not what they need to be in some IPSC offices.

UVAE also raised concerns with the coding in the system. They stated that some codes are hard to find, that the code for asking questions of a Team Leader shows that the employee is on a comfort break, and that there is no code for sending faxes.

Action Item: ADM SD to ensure that a review of the codes for ICE System is done and any issues are corrected.

15. Other Items

No other items were added to the agenda.

16. Next Meeting

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for early April 2014.
