

## MEETING MINUTES

### NATIONAL LABOUR-MANAGEMENT CONSULTATION COMMITTEE (NLMCC)

### VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA (VAC)

and

### THE UNION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS' EMPLOYEES (UVAE)

Tuesday, November 17, 2015

#### **Chairperson:**

General (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister

#### **In attendance:**

#### UVAE

Carl Gannon, National President

Jayne Auranen, National Executive Vice-President (NEVP)

Debi Buell, National Vice-President, Charlottetown Head Office (Charlottetown VP)

Michelle Bradley, National Vice-President, Atlantic Region (Atlantic VP)

Daniel Gaulin, National Vice-President, Quebec Region (Quebec VP)

Zarina Khan, National Vice-President, Ontario Region (Ontario VP)

Kristin Beauchamp, National Vice-President, Deer-Lodge Centre (Deer Lodge VP)

Virginia Vaillancourt, National Vice-President, Western Region (Western VP)

Toufic El-Daher, Alternate National Vice-President, Quebec Region

Lisa Ellsworth, Alternate National Vice-President, Atlantic Region

Anne Howard, Administrative Assistant

#### Management

General (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister

Karen Ellis, Associate Deputy Minister

Glynnis French, A/Assistant Deputy Minister, Human Resources & Corporate Services  
(A/ADM HRCS) (Regrets)

Sue Foster, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Oversight and Communications Branch  
(ADM SOC)

Michel Doiron, Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch (ADM SD)

Bernard Butler, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration Branch  
(ADM SPC)

Charlotte Bastien, Director General, Field Operations (DG FO)

Louise Wallis, A/Director General, Human Resources (A/DGHR)

Rachel Gravel, Executive Director, Ste. Anne's Hospital (ED SAH)

Dale Sharkey, Director General, Veterans Review and Appeal Board (DG VRAB)

Jonathan O'Keefe, Corporate Labour Relations Consultant

## **1. Welcoming Remarks**

The Deputy Minister opened by welcoming the group and stated that he was thrilled to be participating in person for the first time at an NLMCC with UVAE. He introduced Karen Ellis as the new Associate Deputy Minister at VAC. The Deputy Minister informed the group that we have now entered a new phase of open Government as the mandate letters provided to each Minister by Prime Minister Trudeau have been shared with the public. He indicated that VAC was still evaluating the mandate letter to determine the impacts on VAC staff and programs. He assured the group that although the expectations of Canada's Veterans have increased, VAC will deliver. He closed by reinforcing the importance of teamwork and partnerships between management and UVAE.

The UVAE National President opened by stating that VAC has recently come through a difficult period but that the future was looking brighter. He added that he looks forward to continuing to build relationships with management in order to provide better programs and services for our Veterans. He reiterated UVAE's commitment to working together with management for the betterment of all.

## **2. Approval of Minutes and Review of Follow-up Items from April 22, 2015.**

The minutes from the April 22, 2015 meeting were approved.

### **3a. Branch Updates**

#### Human Resources & Corporate Services Branch

The A/DGHR passed on regrets from the A/ADM HRCS who was unable to attend.

The A/DGHR advised that the National Security Standards for Area Offices are finalized and upgrades identified are underway in priority offices. She added that significant work was done to improve the stability and performance of Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI). This has led to double the processing power for each virtual desktop, standardized workstations in IPSC locations and improved performance of applications such as CSDN.

The A/DGHR advised that GC Docs training continues throughout VAC, and that there are currently 758 trained users. The goal is to have all users trained by March 2016. She further indicated that the Email Transformation Initiative, which will transfer all Federal Government employees to one email system ([user@canada.ca](mailto:user@canada.ca)), is scheduled to take place at VAC from November 29 – December 18, 2015.

The A/DGHR concluded by stating that the 2016/2017 Integrated Business Planning (IBP) process was underway at VAC. The process will ensure the right funding is in place to support core business goals as well as the Five Year Strategic Plan objectives. The plan will be shared with employees once completed.

The Western VP indicated that there have been a lot of changes amongst Human Resources (HR) staff lately, which in some cases has led to a lack of consistency on files. She added that they were unsure who they were to contact on certain files with the recent changes. The A/DGHR agreed that there has been turnover in HR and shared some of the same concerns in regards to consistency. She indicated that a new Director of National HR Operations had recently been hired and a review of overall service was being completed.

The Ontario VP offered kudos to Mitch Freeman, Director General of IT/IM & Administration. She had spoken to Mitch while at a Bureau of Pensions Advocates (BPA) conference in Charlottetown regarding her concerns with VDI. He followed up with her three days later to see if her problems had been resolved and continued to call on a regular basis to ensure things were going better.

**Action Item: A/DGHR to provide UVAE with an updated workload responsibility chart from HR Operations.**

**Action Item: A/DGHR to provide updated Org Charts to UVAE.**

**Action Item: A/DGHR to confirm that a manager can no longer change or edit a Performance Appraisal once it has been signed by the employee.**

#### Service Delivery Branch

The ADM SD opened by recognizing all the hard work by staff in the field during Veterans Week. He commended UVAE for the passion and dedication displayed by their members at commemorative events across the country. He also acknowledged the hard work by staff across the country to help alleviate the backlog. In July a goal was established to process 5505 disability benefits claims that were over 16 weeks old by the end of August. This goal was achieved. He indicated that the SD Branch continues to look at streamlining the application process, making it more efficient for Veterans.

The ADM SD indicated that he's working diligently with HR to staff positions in the field. Yesterday he met with 40 new staff in Montreal (8 Case Managers and 32 Client Service Agents). Processes are underway to fill the remaining vacancies. All staff, both new and existing, will be provided training opportunities to ensure they have the necessary skills to excel at their position.

The Atlantic VP indicated she was glad to hear of the Disability Benefits review as she sees the Department continually repeating backlog patterns. She inquired as to what

stage this review was in. The ADM SD indicated that it was at the early stages. SD Branch is currently working with Policy to determine where the disconnects exist and how they can be resolved keeping care, compassion and respect in mind.

The Western VP questioned whether the new hires were indeterminate and whether there was further succession planning underway for upcoming retirements. The ADM SD responded that the new hires are indeterminate but there has been temporary movement amongst existing positions (actings, backfills, etc). He further indicated that he's currently trying to create pools to hire the staff he's been approved for to date but also hopes to create pre-qualified pools that can be used in the future for vacancies as statistics show a turnover of approximately 10% per year.

The UVAE National President requested demographic statistics for Case Managers and Client Service Agents. The DGFO responded that this was currently underway as part of the IBP process.

**Action Item: ADM SD to provide UVAE with a copy of demographic studies being completed for Case Managers and Client Service Agents as part of the IBP process once complete.**

#### Strategic Policy and Commemoration

The ADM SPC opened by acknowledging the work of Commemoration staff during the recent Veterans Week. He added that they are now focused on upcoming events at Beaumont-Hamel in 2016 and Vimy in 2017, both of which involve a tremendous amount of work.

The ADM SPC indicated that it's a very exciting time in the Policy Division. The team is fully engaged in working to action commitments made in the Minister's mandate letter which was recently shared with the Department. He added that it's an equally exciting time for the Veterans 20/20 project team as they work to translate the Five Year Strategic Plan into concrete actions, while keeping in mind the basic pillars of achieving service excellence, ensuring Veteran-centric policy and fixing the seam.

#### Strategic Oversight and Communications

The ADM SOC indicated that one of the main roles of her newly formed branch was to provide strategic oversight and coordination of internal and external priorities with central agencies, other federal departments and stakeholders. She added that another major role of her branch is open and transparent communications which is paramount with our new government. The Communications Division is responsible for providing these open communications while respecting cabinet confidence. The Branch is actively involved in working with Service Delivery to help create improved and more efficient services for Veterans.

UVAE requested that the ADM SOC ensure that stakeholders such as unions and those who are actually delivering the programs are consulted in regards to the Service Delivery review. The ADM SOC confirmed that they would be.

The UVAE National President requested that he be invited to the next Stakeholders Summit, to which the Deputy Minister agreed.

**Action Item: UVAE National President to be invited to the next Stakeholders Summit.**

**3b. VRAB Update**

The DG VRAB passed on regrets from the Acting Chair of VRAB, Mr. Tom Jarmyn, who was unable to attend.

The DG VRAB indicated that they were continuing to move forward with their strategic objectives, and were working to change how they do business. They continue to work closely with the Bureau of Pension Advocates (BPA) to update the old model of scheduling hearings and have involved staff in this change. VRAB has made an internal commitment to move less paper and are hoping to have a paperless process by Summer 2016. She closed by indicating that VRAB is finalizing its program evaluation and that results will be shared with staff once complete.

**4. Ste. Anne's Hospital Update**

The A/DGHR informed the group that a letter dated October 21, 2015 from Michel Fontaine, Deputy Minister of Health and Social Services for Quebec, confirmed the transfer date to be April 1, 2016. As such, letters of offer from the Province of Quebec and affected letters were distributed to staff on November 2, 2015. A WFA-ADI meeting was held on October 28, 2015 to go over the letters with bargaining agents prior to their members receiving them. Since the distribution of letters, information sessions have been arranged for employees to help them understand their choices. The ED SAH added that HR had met with each employee since they received their letter and that more information sessions were scheduled for the upcoming weeks to answer questions and assist staff. On top of this, a financial fair is being planned for the last week in November and a pension fair for early December. She further added that they were in the process of making corrections to letters containing incorrect information received by a few employees.

The Quebec VP stated that November 2 was a very emotional day at SAH. He indicated that he receives regular calls from members who are struggling with the decision making process and stated that the timelines for decisions are quite difficult as it ends right around Christmas. He added that employees are also quite concerned about potential delays in pay due to the switch to the Province and asked if VAC could endeavor to pay employee severances on April 1, 2016 to bridge the potential gap. The

Quebec VP raised further concerns in relation to the quality of service post-transfer and the union rights as of April 1, 2016.

The A/DGHR responded that the decision making time-frames come from the collective agreements but committed to following up to determine if any flexibility could be offered to employees. She added that she would work with compensation to have payments processed for staff as soon as possible and that VAC has a committee in place to ensure that Veterans receive the quality service that was negotiated in the transfer agreement. The ED SAH added that her staff will do all they can to help employees make their decisions and will offer 1vs1 sessions with staff as requested.

The Western VP questioned whether those who received incorrect information in their November 2 letter will get an extension to their decision due date. The ED SAH confirmed that those employees had received their new letters on November 17 and the A/DGHR indicated she would follow-up to determine if allowing an extension to these employees was a possibility under the collective agreements.

The Deputy Minister confirmed that a copy of the transfer agreement was on route to the UVAE National President.

**Action Item: VAC to research the possibility of having severance paid to SAH employees April 1, 2016 to help alleviate the gap between Federal and Provincial pays.**

**Action Item: VAC to determine if employees can receive an extension to the 60 days that were provided to determine if they'll accept the offer of employment from the Province of Quebec.**

**Action Item: VAC to determine if employees who received amended letters can receive an extension to their 60 day decision period.**

## **5. Departmental Budget Update**

The Director General of Finance (DG Finance) joined by teleconference for this item. She indicated that VAC ended 2014/2015 with a \$10.4 million carry-forward in operating funds. These funds are being used to cover future collective bargaining increases and are allowing VAC to address other unfunded departmental priorities.

She added that as of November 5, 2015, the Department's budget for 2015/2016 was \$3.56 billion which included new funding sought through 2015/2016 supplementary estimates. It is important to note that this funding does not include funding associated with recently announced new hiring initiatives. Funding for these hires has yet to be formally approved by Parliament.

The DG Finance indicated that the Department operates on a tight budget with only \$212 million to run the day to day operations, which amounts to just 6% of the overall

budget. Of this amount, 73% funds the salary and wages of staff. There is little room for discretionary spending. For 2015/2016 VAC has developed an Integrated Business Plan (IBP) to align financial resources to high priority activities and/or new pressures.

The Western VP requested that a copy of the DG Finance's presentation be shared with UVAE.

**Action Item: DG Finance to share a copy of her presentation with UVAE.**

## **6. Centralized Client Mail Centre – Matane Scanning**

The ADM SD indicated that many of the issues that had been occurring in the past had been resolved and that he continues to meet with Matane on a regular basis even though they are now meeting their turn-around-times. He further added that the Centralized Client Mail Centre (CCMC) had received funding for 8 indeterminate CR-04 positions and that processes are underway to staff these positions.

The Atlantic VP raised a few issues that continue to occur. She indicated that employees find that the imaging tab on CSDN is not very user friendly or searchable. When working under tight timeframes, it's imperative that forms can be found quickly. She asked the ADM SD to consider adding a "key word search". She also indicated that each time a paper is scanned it creates a triple work item. This is creating additional work as each individual who receives the work item must determine if it's relevant to them. Finally, she indicated that paper mail, which used to be sorted and organized by admins, has been replaced by electronic records which must be sorted by CSA's as admins do not have access to CSDN. The ADM SD responded that he had heard similar concerns about "searchability" from adjudicators and is actively working with Matane to have the information coded. He committed to following up on the triple work items and the CSDN access for admins.

**Action Item: ADM SD to verify the scanning process which is currently leading to triple work items being generated.**

**Action Item: ADM SD to very whether access to CSDN can be provided to admins to help CSA's with mail sorting/organizing.**

## **7. Veterans 20/20: Workplace of Choice**

The A/DGHR indicated that the Workplace of Choice action plan has been developed using the results from the 2014 Public Service Employee Survey. Areas of improvement have been identified and following employee consultations, year-one priorities have been identified as the following: employee engagement, senior management visibility, stabilization of staffing, delegation of authority, recognition, investment in learning and physical and mental health of employees. The plan was officially launched on VAC Today in September 2015.

The Western VP indicated that although staff receive emails about Mental Health and stress management, there are ongoing negative impacts on staff due to the work environment and a lack of support for work-life balance. She stated that some staff are able to take advantage of events such as Employment Equity week, while others don't have the same opportunities due to where they work. She further added that staff in Field Operations are devastated by the change in the policy surrounding their breaks and lunches. She indicated that employees are no longer able to combine breaks and lunches and that 15 minutes, which employee sometimes cannot take due to operational requirements, is often not even enough to get a coffee and fresh air. There appears to be a lack of consistency as to how this is being implemented across the country. She further added that there is an increase in bullying and harassment across the country, some of which is initiated by managers.

The Deputy Minister responded that as the Champion for Mental Health at VAC he takes these comments very seriously. He assured UVAE that he is there to listen to employee concerns and the main reason why VAC had recently been given 309 new resources was because of concerns raised by the first two offices he visited as Deputy Minister (Halifax and Ottawa). He added that the collective agreement states that employees must work a 7.5 hour work day and he has given the ADM's and others flexibility to work within the collective agreement: delegate, empower, trust. He requested that UVAE inform him of the offices where harassment is taking place so he can work to resolve it and confirmed that he would not accept leadership creating these circumstances.

The UVAE National President stated that front-line workers are being asked to be flexible by VAC and in exchange he is requesting that management offer some flexibility to staff. He re-iterated the points made by the Western VP and asked that VAC find a way to work within the collective agreement and allow for staff to combine breaks and lunch as requested. The ADM SD responded that VAC has received an interpretation on this issue from Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS). He stated that it is not a VAC specific situation and that all Public Service departments must follow the same interpretation. He also echoed the Deputy Ministers comments in requesting that he and the other ADM's be made aware should there be issues of bullying/harassment within their branches so they can work to resolve them right away.

The ADM SD and the UVAE National President agreed to arrange a follow-up conversation in regards to breaks and lunches.

**Action Item: ADM SD and UVAE National President to arrange a meeting to continue the discussion in relation to combining breaks and lunches.**

## **8. Service Excellence Business Case Update**

The ADM SD stated that, as everyone is aware, VAC is hiring. VAC is working toward hiring 309 new indeterminate resources. To date, 57 new Case Managers and 29 new Client Service Agents have been hired. Although the initial Case Manager process has

been exhausted, a second process is now underway with a goal of staffing 48 more by April 1, 2016.

The UVAE National President questioned the recent Liberal announcement of 400 new staff for VAC. He inquired as to whether this meant 400 new positions on top of the 309 positions that have already been announced. The Deputy Minister responded that they were unsure at this point as staff continues to analyze and interpret the VAC mandate letter. He did state that it's clear from the mandate letter that 9 VAC offices will re-open. The UVAE National President added that Veterans are expecting the Department to hire the original 309 staff, plus an additional 400 staff and will be outraged if this is not the case.

The Alternate Atlantic VP questioned whether the educational requirements for Case Manager positions were too stringent. She inquired as to whether the education will be changed should VAC be unsuccessful in staffing 48 new Case Managers. The ADM SD responded that he is looking at multiple options to fill the positions including pools, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), targeted recruitment and apprenticeship programs. He indicated that his goal is to have access to more than the 48 Case Managers he currently requires so he can proactively plan for future attrition. The Alternate Atlantic VP added that some Client Service Agents were disappointed that they couldn't meet the Case Manager education requirements and was happy to hear that apprenticeship programs were being considered. The ADM SD responded that the program is currently in the planning stage and that each employee's circumstances would be looked at on a case by case basis in the future.

## **9. Medavie FHCPS Update**

The ADM SD informed the group that the new contract with Medavie was implemented on August 1, 2015. As of October 31, 2015 there were 7200 clients registered, which exceeds the expected uptake. Although we continue to try and improve the system, we have received very positive feedback from Veterans to date.

The Atlantic VP indicated that the biggest change to Field staff is that they cannot generate their own authorization numbers, which are required by providers when submitting a bill. Although Blue Cross is to generate authorizations within 48 hours, there are cases where this process is taking up to a week and Blue Cross is not informing the Department when the number has been generated. She added a further concern that the BHSOL system needs to be improved. Due to privacy concerns, documents that are gathered for files must be sent to Matane to be scanned prior to being uploaded, which leads to very poor quality imaging and longer delays.

The ADM SD responded that he'd follow-up on both the BHSOL issues and delays in generating the authorization numbers at Blue Cross. He stated that he had been informed that authorizations were being generated on time. He re-iterated the important role that Client Service Agents play at VAC and his view that their work is growing, not diminishing as part of the inter-disciplinary team. The Deputy Minister echoed the ADM

SD's comments in relation to Client Service Agents and stated that he is working to delegate decision making as close to the front lines as he can; delegate, empower, trust.

The UVAE National President added that he would like to see Client Service Agents used as part of the VAC outreach program. He stated that they are well positioned to be engaged in bringing Veterans to VAC for services. The Deputy Minister welcomed any help Client Service Agents could provide in helping to close the seam and ensuring that VAC reaches 100% of individuals leaving the Canadian Armed Forces.

The Alternate Quebec VP expressed his disappointment in the lack of authorization power that Client Service Agents have. He stated that Blue Cross does not have the same passion and needs to improve the service they provide VAC. He encouraged management to provide Client Service Agents with the same level of delegated authority they had in the past.

**Action Item: ADM SD to review BHSOL system limitations.**

**Action Item: ADM SD to follow-up to determine if Blue Cross is meeting the established turn-around-times for generating authorization numbers.**

## **10. Service Delivery Consultation Action Plan Update**

The ADM SD stated that branch wide engagement and consultation with staff had occurred over 32 sessions in 20 cities from February – April 2015. The consultations focused on the front-line workers and their needs. The top issues that were raised included a lack of resources, overly complex programs and policies, and the need for effective communications. Based on the findings of consultations, a branch strategic direction for staff is being developed which will link to the action plan. The ADM SD offered to provide UVAE with a full de-brief of the findings of the consultations. The Deputy Minister added that this project was as a result of what had been heard from employees across the country and re-iterated management's commitment to listening to employees.

The Western VP raised concerns in regards to the Client Service Agent centralization pilot program. She stated that centralization has added long delays and negatively affected Client Service Agent morale. She added that the agents were tired of apologizing to clients on behalf of VAC and urged the Department to review centralization.

The Deputy Minister stated his willingness to review the centralization model in an effort to find the approach that will provide the best service to our Veterans. The ADM SD added that he would review the pilot program and asked that UVAE raise concerns such as these as soon as possible without waiting for bi-annual National meetings.

**Action Item: VAC to arrange a de-brief for UVAE on the findings of the Service Delivery Consultations.**

**Action Item: VAC to review the CSA centralization pilot program in light of concerns raised by UVAE.**

#### **11. VIP Annual Follow-Up Process Update**

The ADM SD opened by apologizing for the lack of consultation prior to the Minister's announcement of the new VIP model in the House of Commons. The new process will be monitored from a Vet-Centric perspective to determine if it's meeting its objectives.

The Atlantic VP raised concerns with the new VIP system. It was agreed that she would provide the ADM SD with specific examples after the meeting for follow-up.

**Action Item: ADM SD to follow-up on VIP issues provided to him by the Atlantic VP.**

#### **12. Update on the Pay System – Phoenix**

The A/DGHR stated that as of October 26, 2015 all VAC pay accounts (except SAH) had been transferred to the Public Service Pay Centre in Miramichi, NB. She added that the revised date for the implementation of the new Government of Canada pay system, Phoenix, was now February 24, 2016. Just-in-time training will be offered to managers and employees from the Canada School of Public Service in the lead-up to Phoenix.

The VP Charlottetown commented on the great work done by VAC Compensation Advisors over the years – a sentiment that was echoed by the A/DGHR.

The VP Quebec indicated that he had members who were experiencing long delays receiving their acting pay. The A/DGHR responded that two experienced Compensation Advisors had been retained by the Department to work on issue resolution with the Pay Centre. She asked the VP Quebec to send his examples to HR for follow-up.

**Action Item: A/DGHR to follow-up on cases of employees experiencing long delays in receiving their acting pay.**

Note: Agenda items 13-17 were not discussed as they had been indirectly discussed throughout the meeting.

#### **18. BPA Representation at NLMCC Meetings**

The A/DGHR confirmed that the Executive Director and Chief Pensions Advocate from the Bureau of Pension Advocates would be at the next meeting.

**Action Item: VAC to ensure the Executive Director and Chief Pensions Advocate from the Bureau of Pension Advocates attends the next NLMCC meeting.**

The Deputy Minister closed the meeting by reminding the entire table that it costs nothing to set a positive example.