

Spouses Supporting Transition

Study Report

September 21, 2020

Veterans Ombudsman des Vétérans



Government
of Canada

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Canada

Vision: *Respectful and fair treatment of Veterans and their families*

Mission: *To be an agent of positive change to advance fair outcomes for Veterans and their families*

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des Vétérans

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Introduction

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman's (OVO) *Transitioning Successfully: A Qualitative Study*¹ identified spouses as one of the greatest sources of support for medically-released Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Veterans who self-identified as having successfully transitioned to civilian life. While medically-released Veterans may struggle with military-to-civilian transition (MCT), having support from their spouses is a major contributing factor to a successful transition.

Spouses Supporting Transition explores the lived experiences of 13 spouses of CAF Veterans, who medically-released between 2006 and 2016 and who self-identified as having successfully transitioned.²

The objectives of this study were to answer the following questions:

- What were the biggest stressors during transition?
- What were the sources of support during transition?
- What were the challenges during transition?
- What helped achieve success?

This insight into the lived experiences of spouses during transition from military to civilian life can help to inform and improve the supports provided to CAF members, Veterans, and their families as well as identify areas for future research.

¹ OVO Report. *Transitioning Successfully: A Qualitative Study*. Source: <https://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/eng/reports/reports-reviews/transition>. November 2017.

² For the purposes of this study, the OVO's definition of spouse incorporates both the definition of spouse and common-law partner as set out by the Canada Revenue Agency: the person to whom you are legally married or with whom you are living in a conjugal relationship and to whom at least one of the following situations applies:

- the current relationship has lasted at least 12 continuous months;
- is the parent of your child by birth or adoption; or
- has custody and control of your child and your child is wholly dependent on that person for support.

Source: <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/tax/individuals/topics/about-your-tax-return/tax-return/completing-a-tax-return/personal-address-information/marital-status.html>.

Methodology

Begun in 2018, *Spouses Supporting Transition* is a qualitative study looking at the lived experiences of spouses of CAF Veterans who medically released between 2006-2016. The methodology included two phases. The first phase was a comprehensive online questionnaire of 46 questions issued to 13 spouses of medically-released Veterans. The second phase was a day-long focus group that included participants from Phase I.

The OVO developed all research methodology, including the participant recruitment and selection criteria, the research areas of interest, the online survey questions and the focus group guidelines. The Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research Qualitative Research were followed to ensure that the objectives were met and that the research undertaken conformed to the legislative and policy requirements as well as Government of Canada and industry standards.

To attract a diverse group of participants, the OVO recruited and screened participants through stakeholders, the OVO website and social media, seeking a maximum of 15 participants who were spouses of CAF Veterans who:

- Self-identified as being the spouse of a Veteran who medically-released from the CAF between 2006 and 2016;
- Felt that the Veteran has successfully transitioned; and
- Were in a spousal relationship with the Veteran before and after release.

A release date of post-2006 was deemed necessary to reflect the current suite of benefits available to Veterans and their families under the New Veterans Charter/the *Veterans Well-being Act*.

The OVO screened (Annex A – Screening Questionnaire) and selected 13 volunteers from the 17 respondents³ to participate in the survey. Of the 13 volunteers who completed the survey, 7 attended the focus group in person while 2 submitted written responses. Once selected, participants were required to complete a “Consent to Participate” form which included consent for both the on-line survey and the focus group, should they be selected. The consent form was based on academic research best practices and Government of Canada Public Opinion Research Standards.

³ Of the 17 applicants, 3 did not complete the screening questionnaire, and 1 further applicant was screened out as their spousal relationship did not include both periods before and after release.

The Phase I online survey was administered using the Voxco online survey tool. The survey questions were based on the previously completed research methodology of the OVO's *Transitioning Successfully: A Qualitative Study*. It took approximately 30 minutes to complete and consisted of 46 questions (Annex B), exploring five areas of interest:

- Family and Relationships
- Household Role
- Employment
- Transition Process
- Transition Programs

Following the completion of the online survey, the OVO conducted Phase II, the one-day, professionally facilitated focus group, in Ottawa, on November 14th, 2018, with 7 participants. Two survey participants, who were unable to take part in person, submitted written responses to the discussion themes.

The results of the online survey served as an opportunity to gather initial data to inform the Phase II focus group discussion guide themes (Annex C):

- The participants' role in the transition process
- The transition's effect on the spousal relationship
- Formal and informal supports
- Services the family needed or currently needs
- Preparing for transition and defining success

After guided discussions of the five themes, an open forum discussion was held at the end of the day to allow participants to raise any other issues relevant to their personal experience. The focus group was bilingual so that participants could discuss in the official language of their choosing, and the facilitator was able to translate as necessary. A bilingual contractor from Earncliffe Strategy Group facilitated the focus group.

Figure 1: Demographic of Profile Participants

Participant Demographic – 13 participants	
Age	All over 40
Gender	All women
Service	None served in the CAF
Geography	Most lived in Ontario

Veteran Demographic	
Status	All are Veterans who medically-released
Length of Service	8=20 years, 4=10-20 years, 1=< 10 years
Rank	3 officers, 10 non-commissioned members
Service Type	9 Regular, 2 Reserve, 2 both
Branch	8 Army, 2 Navy, 1 Air Force, 2 multiple

Key Findings

The results of the online survey served as an opportunity to gather initial data to inform the Phase II focus group discussion guide themes and are grouped in the following categories:

- Family, relationships, and household roles
- Employment
- Transitional effect on spousal relationship
- Formal and informal supports
- Services the family needed or currently needs
- Preparing for transition and defining success
- Preparing for transition, challenges and defining success

The survey and focus group findings highlight that during the MCT process, spouses take on more household responsibilities including an increase in solo parenting resulting in an increase in caregiver overload and psychological burden. Most of the spouses reported that their employment was impacted by the MCT, and that MCT strained the spousal relationship.

The top three reported stressors were the Veteran's health issues, financial security, and maintaining family stability. The spouses also reported that the top three sources of support were family, friends, and counselors/therapists. Spouses reported that informal supports were the most helpful and that formal supports were complex and confusing. They identified that formal supports would be more effective with better communication with spouses, better access to health care for the Veteran, the creation of formal support groups for spouses, and assistance with managing finances.

Role of the Spouse in the transition process

Participants described their roles through and after transition as "all-encompassing" such that they were taking on more, if not all, of the responsibilities within the household.

Family, Relationships and Household Roles

When asked about children, the survey results showed that 10 participants reported having children. Six participants had two children each and three participants had three children. One participant had one child. Fifteen of the 22 children were under 18 years of age. The number and age of children could have an impact on parenting roles which was discussed in the focus group.

"The kids know Dad's fuse is short. They come to me for everything, I am the constant."

**"Our kids are starting to pick up things that are different about daddy:
Why can't he find his way out of a paper bag?"**

According to the survey results, most participants (9) reported that their usual household responsibilities were affected by their spouse's transition. Six spouses noted an increase in responsibility in all aspects of the household. When asked about receiving adequate support from their spouse in terms of household responsibilities, only one spouse indicated no, while seven indicated partially and five indicated yes.

During the focus group, participants described the immense emotional and psychological burden of being a caregiver, frequent solo parent, and household manager when the Veteran spouse is incapable of caring for themselves or their children. The discussion highlighted the effect of transition on household roles and responsibilities:

- Several participants commented on their spouse's limited ability to do chores, care for their children, engage in self-care, schedule and remember appointments, or drive.
- Some participants could not ask their spouses for help because either the Veterans were overwhelmed by the impact of the transition or of their physical or mental health limitations.
- Most participants explained that their spouses had been contributing to part of the household and childrearing responsibilities prior to their transition but are now only capable of getting up and going to work every day.
- Several participants felt frustrated because they were trying to advocate for someone who at times minimized their own difficulties and barriers to avoid the perceived stigma of asking for help.
- One participant largely isolated herself from friends and relatives in order to preserve her energy for keeping the family running and putting food on the table.

Employment

Most survey respondents (8) reported that their employment was affected by their spouse's transition. Twelve participants were employed before their spouse's release and, of those, 9 were working full-time, with 3 working part-time. While the survey did not identify whether any of the participants were no longer employed after their spouse's release, it did pose the question "Are you employed now in the same job that you were working before release?" to which 9 participants responded "no".

During the focus group discussion, participants described how transition adversely impacted their careers and aspirations. Some were required to leave their jobs to care for their spouse and most felt that their careers had been limited either by the transition or by the fact they were a military spouse and had to move every few years. The participants felt that the requirement to move was a career-limiting factor which affected their own job options during MCT.

“It hurt my resume, jumping from job to job. My opportunities are now limited.”

“I had to take a job lower than my qualifications.”

“I lost my pension. I had to start over.”

Transition Effect on Spousal Relationship

When asked in the survey how satisfied they were with their current relationship with the Veteran, 11 of the 13 participants reported being very satisfied or satisfied.

During the focus group discussion several participants mentioned that the transition process took a vast toll on their relationship. In some cases the Veteran was described as having become an entirely different person, leading the spouse to seriously consider separation and divorce. However, over the course of the discussion, some participants mentioned feeling that their relationship became stronger as challenges were overcome.

“During that transition I wasn’t sure we were going to stay married.”

“He cannot be relied on to care for our children.”

“The Veteran’s PTSD affects me and my children.”

Some participants said that they would not have committed to, supported, and/or encouraged their spouses’ military careers had they known the possible and wide-ranging effects from injuries related to military service. The discussion revealed the depth of commitment and sacrifice of many military spouses, as well as a sense that their well-being, careers, and even other relationships have been and may continue to be secondary to the needs of their Veteran spouse.

Formal and Informal Supports

The survey questionnaire asked participants about their use of formal supports including CAF, VAC and other community programs.⁴ The survey results recorded:

- Four participants reported personally accessing any CAF transition programming. All four rated the programming they accessed effective.
- Only three participants reported personally accessing any formal VAC programming and the range of effectiveness varied from not effective, somewhat effective and effective.
- Only one participant accessed a transition-related program or service offered by a community or non-profit group. However the program was OSISS which is a CAF/VAC program.

The participants were also asked to rank their top three most important sources of informal support during the MCT process. In order, the survey results showed the most important sources of informal support were:

1. Family
2. Friends
3. Counselors/therapists⁵

“My in-laws were amazing. It would have been more difficult without them.”

“Family. My parents and his parents.”

“My greatest source of support would be my daughter.”

⁴ The Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group was established in 2019 to support all members and their families and to ensure access to the programs and services they need as they transition from military to civilian life.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/transition.html>

⁵ In the OVO's previous study, *Determinants of Successful Transition*, Veterans reported similar findings including their spouse, counsellor/therapist, and friends/children being their greatest sources of support.

The focus group discussion probed further into the use of formal and informal sources of support. When asked what was their greatest source of support during the MCT process, most participants tended to raise informal supports first or exclusively. The discussion reflected the survey results, which revealed that only three participants made use of formal VAC programs. Additionally, they described most formal supports as invisible, confusing, or inconsistently granted.

Family and friends were an important source of support for many participants; particularly those family and friends with a military background and who knew how to navigate VAC's system. Some participants pointed out that having someone else to talk to was key to their own sense of well-being, and those who did not have that support felt especially isolated and frustrated.

Several participants also mentioned counselling or therapy, and faith as a key source of support, especially in terms of keeping the marriage together. Some participants were able to access counselling offered through the CAF/VAC programs and services, but they also criticized what was described as the case managers' reluctance or suspicion regarding the need for counselling as well as any ongoing approvals for it. One participant mentioned wanting to be able to pay privately for certain services like counselling to avoid the stress and anxiety that came from continuously having to prove a need for mental health treatment or other necessities.

Some participants stated that they received very effective support through their pastor, and mentioned that the padres (CAF chaplains) provide an important source of support at very difficult moments.

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 Veteran spouses up and out of the house.

Third-party programs and local support services came up several times during the discussion. In particular, Wounded Warriors Canada was seen as a particularly popular avenue of support for the Veteran.

“We found Wounded Warriors. They created a safe space for people overcoming PTSD. I had no idea about all these resources.”

“Without a dog, we would not be happy at all. He comes home, and he gets to play, and we get to do the dog thing and it bring happiness to life.”

In terms of VAC services, some participants said that they did not have strong relationships with their VAC case manager and felt that case managers were too few in number, overworked, and stressed or unwell themselves. Those who had had a positive experience with a case manager praised them for listening, dealing with them on a human level, providing advice or evaluation in a direct manner, caring, and being proactive.

The most significant challenge during the MCT process reported by the participants was their lack of awareness and/or perceived poor communication about the available supports and conflicting information about benefit eligibility. 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 for such benefits. Those who had successfully found a benefit reported that they had found it haphazardly on the advice of one their informal supports (i.e., members of the clergy, friends, family, etc.).

“Not one of us used [VAC], and we are considered the success stories.”

**“There are too many hurdles and barriers to accessing VAC services.
I really don’t trust VAC; it is a trigger for my husband, dealing with the system.”**

“My husband is afraid to advocate for himself because he is afraid of losing his benefits.”

“The system makes him feel like he is banging his head on the wall.”

One participant mentioned attending a Mental Health First Aid Course, which was described as quite helpful, and the participant lamented not knowing about it earlier.⁶ Other participants felt that having more tools at their disposal, such as mental health first aid, would have contributed to earlier success.

⁶ MHFA is conducted by the MFRCs and is available under the VAC Veteran Family Program.

Services the Family Needed or Currently Needs

Participants highlighted the need for financial services such as training or money management. The perception that the Veteran is spending unwisely as a coping mechanism, or is unable to make prudent financial decisions about lump sum awards was discussed. Some participants stated that they felt the information they received from SISIP⁷ was unhelpful or even misleading. There are financial literacy aids available through Military Family Resource Centres, although the participants seemed largely unaware of this service.

Other suggestions for improved support for family members through MCT included providing the following:

- Improvements to existing services such as faster turnaround times, more flexible deadlines, and information packages specifically for medically-released Veterans;
- More opportunities for the spouse to advocate on behalf of the Veteran;
- Mental and physical health services for conditions that are related to the Veteran's transition and release;
- Confidential support groups for spouses; and
- Direct communication such as regular follow-ups from case managers or even initial contact from VAC as opposed to the Veteran having to seek out contact.

Preparing for Transition, Challenges and Defining Success

In general, the survey and focus group discussion document that the participants felt unprepared for MCT and found the process difficult. They also expressed that defining successful transition is not straight-forward and largely subjective.

⁷ <https://www.sisip.com/en/>

In response to the survey question “How long do you feel that it took for your spouse to transition successfully?” participants’ responded:

- 5 reported that the transition had not in fact ended and was an ongoing, long-term process
- 2 reported over 5 years
- 4 reported 2-4 years
- 1 reported 1-2 years
- 1 reported under 1 year

When asked how difficult the Veteran’s transition process was for the participants, 11 participants found the transition process to be very difficult or moderately difficult.

Only one participant reported feeling very prepared for their spouse’s transition, 4 reported being somewhat prepared, while 8 felt that they weren’t prepared for transition.

The survey participants also ranked the main stressors of the transition process. The top three most stressful aspects of the transition process, in order, were:

- Health issues of the Veteran
- Maintaining financial security
- Maintaining family stability⁸

“Finding a new doctor was an issue, especially when the doctors are not on base.”

“Some days I just have to stay home because I’m worried about his mental health.”

“If you’re posted to one of the most expensive places and now you can’t move, that’s tough. We can’t afford it.”

⁸ In the OVO’s previous study, *Determinants of Successful Transition*, Veterans reported similar findings including financial security, health issues, and maintaining family life as their top three stressors respectively.

During the focus group discussion, participants described feeling, for the most part, unprepared for the MCT process, whether due to a lack of information, information overload, or simply not knowing how hard the transition would be on a number of fronts: financially, emotionally, and physically.

“I never knew the transition process would be as hard as it was. No one talks about it.”

The participants were asked to describe the challenges they faced during their spouses’ transitions, their responses clustered around the following themes:

Challenges	Details
Veterans’ loss of identity and sense of purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans struggled with self-doubt and feelings of emasculation • Participants had to “parent” their spouse after transition • Without the structure of the military, where everything was essentially organized for them, their Veteran spouses were not sure how to function as civilians
Unexpected financial volatility during MCT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant financial impact of transition, particularly given the unexpected lag between their last salary payment (in the CAF) and their first CFSA pension payment • Some participants had to use their savings, dip into their RRSPs, borrow from or move in with family, or take on extra work, etc. to make ends meet
Lack of communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition information was generally communicated directly to the Veteran, who often did not then convey the information to them • Difficulties obtaining information (as the spouse of a Veteran) and receiving unclear and/or conflicting information from VAC about available supports
Immediate disconnect with the CAF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The break with CAF was swift and clean; participants described feeling unwelcome on the base after release, as though the CAF had closed the doors on them • 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 families

Aggravated mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ordeal of transition, including navigating these challenges, adversely affected the Veterans’ mental health • 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
The barrier of stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigma in the perception of mental health issues or needing benefits and services as a sign of weakness • Civilian misconceptions of experiences of military life, and the perception that Veterans are taking advantage of taxpayer money if they are in receipt of benefits and a pension while also working in a second career
Tight timelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only six months (medical release) to make fundamental, life-altering decisions • Needing to urgently decide on major changes such as taking advantage of employment and relocation benefits, which potentially results in unmanageable living arrangements or unsatisfactory job opportunities

Although participants had self-identified as having successfully transitioned, the characterization that their transition was successful felt like an overstatement to most. They described having “come out on the other side” of their transition at a minimum 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 to be truly successful.

“You are going to have good days and bad days. It is not a broken bone. It doesn’t just heal and go away.”

“I’m intrigued to see what is defined as success. We are still married, no one has killed themselves – is that success?”

“Laughing, and dark humour really helped us. It is a huge thing to be able to laugh and have fun again. If you don’t laugh you will cry. Lord knows I did plenty of that as well.”

“Our transition is still ongoing, but we are on the upswing instead of the downward spiral now. We are at a point where we have never been better after being broken.”

Participants identified factors that they considered would define a successful transition:

- Being included in the transition process and specifically improving access to information on transition and available programs and services;
- Financial stability;
- Veteran being happily employed with a sense of purpose;
- Good physical and mental health;
- A strong support network including formal and informal supports;
- An enduring relationship with their spouse;
- Open communication with their spouse and their spouse being able to speak openly about their experiences; and
- Family stability and feeling safe.

Figure 2: What successful transition looks like to a spouse:



To better understand the lived experiences of the spouses of medically-released CAF Veterans and their role as a main source of support during MCT, the OVO undertook a literature review of peer-reviewed research drawn from academic as well as government sources: *Spouses of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans during Military to Civilian Transition: A Literature Review*.⁹ Several common themes were observed from the findings in the Literature Review and the OVO's Spouses Supporting Transition study.

In their 2013 study, Deborah Norris and Sandra Pickrell Baker interviewed seven women spouses to record their experiences as spouses of CAF Veterans diagnosed with PTSD. This study revealed the profound and frequently damaging effects of secondary traumatic stress response, depression, anxiety, loss of self, and other mental health issues caused by living as the partners of these Veterans.¹⁰ The experiences of these spouses and the participants in OVO's Spouses Supporting Transition Study, were similar including feelings that the Veteran's needs superseded those of the entire family, especially those of their partner. Both groups described anticipating the onset of bad moods and attempting to mitigate or at least having to prepare for those challenging times, as well as making changes in social interactions and outings in order to accommodate the Veteran's condition and triggers.¹¹ Another common observation between both studies was that spouses described taking on a parenting role to the Veteran due to having to manage most of the household responsibilities.¹² A study by Cram et al. (2019) included interviews as well as a focus group with the spouses and other family members of CAF Veterans.¹³ This study revealed that the Veterans' mental health problems, "created multifaceted and pervasive changes in family structure, roles, and routines, impacting

⁹ [OVO literature review](#)

¹⁰ Baker, S. P, Norris D. The Experiences of Female Partners of Canadian Forces Veterans Diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. *Shaping the Future: Military and Veteran Health Research*. In: Aiken AB, and Bélanger SAH, editors. *Proceedings of the November 2010 Military and Veteran Health Research forum*. Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research. Kingston (ON): McGill-Queen's University Press; 2013, pp. 175-85.

¹¹ Ibid, 178-9.

¹² Ibid, 179. A later study that evolved from this work reinforced many of these observations and also recorded strategies that Veterans' spouses employed to develop resiliency and self-care. These results may be of use in guiding future discussions about potential supports and services for the spouses and families of CAF Veterans. See Smith-Evans K, Norris D. (2018). *The Experiences of Spouses of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans Diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Pathways to Resilience*. In S. Dursun, S, Urban, & W. Dean (Eds.), *The Home Front: Family Well-Being and Military Readiness*. Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, pp. 123-135.

¹³ Cram H, Norris D, Schwartz K.D, Tam-Seto L, Williams A, Mahar A. (2019). *Impact of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans' Mental Health Problems on the Family During the Military to Civilian Transition*. *Military Behavioral Health*. 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2019.1644260>

caregiving and social participation” and that these changes negatively impacted the mental health and well-being of family members.¹⁴ The OVO’s study confirms that spouses are often forced into a position of untrained and unpaid caregiving to an individual with mental health issues. This tends to be accompanied by more solo parenting, financial burdens, and other responsibilities that encroach significantly on time and energy for critical self-care. As in the OVO’s study, the Cramm et al. (2019) study specifically records the detrimental effects of the transition on the Veteran’s spouse’s employment, as well as having to parent the Veteran and act as a buffer in increasingly reduced social and family interactions. Cramm et al. (2019) also noted the tendency of military families to handle conflicts and challenges internally in accordance with the stoicism of military culture. This may in part explain the low rates of program and service use among the OVO study’s participants.

Themes relating to the spouse as primary caregiver, regardless of the nature of the Veteran’s injury, include pervasive negative impacts on the health, careers, relationships and general well-being of these spouses are also covered in Skomorovsky et al.’s 2019 study.¹⁵ Similar to the OVO’s discussion group findings, this study shows that participants who have been successful in moving through the challenges of MCT often credit their success to an increase in communication and growth between themselves and their Veteran spouse.¹⁶

More recently, research by Skomorovsky et al. (2020)¹⁷ examined survey responses of a representative sample of spouses of Veterans who released in 2016. The OVO’s survey and focus group results echo their findings that many spouses experienced challenges associated with understanding VAC programs, accessing medical services, the Veterans’ search for work, and finances in general. The study also found a correlation between higher daily stress and psychological distress and challenges related to education and finances, finding medical services, and providing ongoing care. A finding that was not part of the OVO study, related to spouses’ loss of military identity and an associated higher reported level of psychological distress.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵ Skomorovsky A, Lee J, Williams L. “Caregiving in Military and Veteran Families,” Research Recap (August 8 2019), The Vanier Institute of the Family.

¹⁶ Ibid, 5.

¹⁷ This study was published following the completion of the OVO’s literature review and consequently was out of scope for the review.

¹⁸ Skomorovskya A, McCuaig Edge H, Lee J, Wan C, Dursun, S. (2020). Military to civilian transition challenges, caregiving activities, and well-being among spouses of newly released Canadian Armed Forces Veterans. *Journal of Military and Veteran Family Health*. 6-1.

Summary and Conclusions

This small qualitative study documents the lived experiences of the MCT of spouses of CAF Veterans who medically-released between 2006 and 2016. The results of this study may inform not only future research but also the development of MCT policy and programs supporting CAF Veterans and their families.

This study highlighted that:

- Proactive, mental health services to military members/Veterans and their families throughout MCT would have benefited many of the participants and their families.
- Consultation with Veterans and their families who accessed programs and services from non-profit organizations could shed light on best-practices and non-traditional support available.
- Veterans and their spouses may define successful MCT differently and understanding these differences could help inform future policy and program design.
- More research is required to:
 - fully understand how MCT can impact spouses' employment, and
 - identify gaps or improvements to programs and services that will minimize the effects of MCT on spouses.
- Future research on the experience of spouses and families during MCT would ideally be undertaken with larger sample sizes and a more diverse population.

Ensuring fairness for the families of CAF Veterans continues to be a priority for the OVO, and the office is engaged in ongoing work to identify both the needs and potential gaps in services and programs for both Veterans and their families that can result in unfairness.

Annexes

Annex A – Screening Questionnaire

Annex B – On-line Survey Instrument and Responses

Annex C – Focus Group Discussion Guide

Annex A – Screening Questionnaire

Spouses Supporting Transition Screening - Questionnaire

Contact Information:

Name:

Email address:

Telephone number:

1. Were/are you a spouse of a Veteran who released from the Canadian Armed Forces between 2006 and 2016?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. In your opinion, did your spouse successfully transition to civilian life?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. Did your spouse medically release?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Were you in a spousal relationship before and after release?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Definition of spouse:

The OVO's definition of spouse incorporates **both** the definition of spouse and common-law partner as set out by the [Canada Revenue Agency](#): the person to whom you are legally married or with whom you are living in a conjugal relationships and to whom at least one of the following situations applies:

- the current relationship has lasted at least 12 continuous months;
- is the parent of your child by birth or adoption; or
- has custody and control of your child and your child is wholly dependent on that person for support.

Annex B – Online Survey Questionnaire

Spouses Supporting Transition

Online Survey - Questionnaire

About Yourself:

5. What is your age? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| a) Under 30 years | 1 |
| b) Between 30 and 39 years | 2 |
| c) Between 40 and 49 years | 6 |
| d) 50 years or older | 4 |
6. What is your gender? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|-----------|----|
| a) Female | 13 |
| b) Male | 0 |
| c) Other | 0 |
7. Where is your primary residence? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| a) Alberta | 0 |
| b) British Columbia | 3 |
| c) Manitoba | 1 |
| d) Newfoundland and Labrador | 1 |
| e) New Brunswick | 0 |
| f) Nova Scotia | 0 |
| g) Northwest Territories | 0 |
| h) Nunavut | 0 |
| i) Ontario | 8 |
| j) Prince Edward Island | 0 |
| k) Quebec | 0 |
| l) Saskatchewan | 0 |
| m) Yukon | 0 |
8. Did you serve in the Canadian Armed Forces? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| a) Yes and I am still serving | 0 |
| b) Yes and I am released | 0 |
| c) No | 13 |

9. How many years of service did you complete prior to releasing? **Total Responses: 0**
- a) Less than 10 years
 - b) 10 to 20 years of service
 - c) 20 years and over
10. What type of service did you have? **Total Responses: 0**
- a) Regular
 - b) Reserve
 - c) Both
11. In what branch of the CAF did you serve? **Total Responses: 0**
- a) Army
 - b) Navy
 - c) Air Force
 - d) More than one
12. What was your rank at the time of release? **Total Responses: 0**
- a) Officer
 - b) Non-commissioned member
13. To what extent was your spouse's release a factor in determining your own release? **Total Responses: 0**
- a) Not at all
 - b) To some extent
 - c) To a moderate extent
 - d) To a great extent

Family and Relationships :

14. Do you have children? **Total Responses: 13**
- a) Yes 10
 - b) No 3
15. If yes, how many? **Total Responses: 10**
- a) 1 1
 - b) 2 6
 - c) 3 3

16. What age groups are your children? (*Select all that apply*) **Total Responses: 14**
- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| a) 5 years of age and under | 1 |
| b) Between 6 and 12 years of age | 3 |
| c) Between 13 and 18 years of age | 5 |
| d) 18 years and older | 5 |
17. What is your current spousal status with the Veteran? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|---------------|----|
| a) Married | 12 |
| b) Common law | 1 |
| c) Separated | 0 |
| d) Divorced | 0 |
18. How satisfied are you with your current relationship with the Veteran? **Total Responses: 12**
- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| a) Very satisfied | 8 |
| b) Satisfied | 3 |
| c) Not satisfied | 1 |
19. If married or common law, at what point did this become your relationship status? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| a) Before my spouse's release date | 13 |
| b) After my spouse's release date | 0 |
20. If divorced or separated, how long after release did this occur? **Total Responses: 0**
- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| a) Within a year | |
| b) Between one and two years | |
| c) After two years | |
21. Do you feel your spousal breakdown was related to service? **Total Responses: 0**
- | | |
|--------------|--|
| a) Yes | |
| b) No | |
| c) Partially | |

Employment:

22. Were you employed before your spouse's release? **Total Responses: 13**
- | | |
|--------|----|
| a) Yes | 12 |
| b) No | 1 |
23. Was this full-time or part-time? **Total Responses: 12**
- | | |
|--------------|---|
| a) Full-time | 9 |
| b) Part-time | 3 |

24. Are you employed now in the same job that you were working before release? **Total Responses: 12**
- a) Yes 3
 - b) No 9

25. Was your employment affected by your spouse's transition? **Total Responses: 12**
- a) Yes 8
 - b) No 4

Household Role:

26. Before release, how much of the overall household responsibilities fell to you? **Total Responses: 13**
- a) All household responsibilities 0
 - b) Most of the household responsibilities 9
 - c) Half the household responsibilities 4
 - d) A minority of household responsibilities 0
 - e) None of the household responsibilities 0

27. Were your usual household responsibilities affected by your spouse's transition? **Total Responses: 13**
- a) Yes 9
 - b) No 2
 - Partially 2

28. How would you say your role has changed? **Total Responses: 11**
- a) I have increased responsibility in all aspects of the household 6
 - b) I have decreased responsibility in all aspects of the household 0
 - c) I am now responsible for different things in the household 4
 - d) I have the same amount of responsibility in all aspects of the household 1

29. To what extent is your spouse aware that the household responsibilities have shifted? **Total Responses: 13**
- a) Not at all 1
 - b) To some extent 4
 - c) To a moderate extent 4
 - d) To a great extent 2

30. Pre-release, for what household responsibilities were you responsible? (*Select all that apply*)
 (Results listed as number of participants who selected the response) **Total Participants: 13**

a) Cleaning	12
b) Laundry	11
c) Maintenance	2
d) Yard care	4
e) Shopping for food (groceries)	13
f) Running household errands	12
g) Preparing meals	11
h) Child care (transportation, activities)	9
i) Pet care	5
j) Elder care	1
k) Planning family leisure activities	11
l) Household finances (bills and banking)	10

31. Presently, what sorts of things are you responsible for? (*Select all that apply*)

(Results listed as number of participants who selected the response) **Total Participants: 13**

a) Cleaning	11
b) Laundry	10
c) Maintenance	4
d) Yard care	7
e) Shopping for food (groceries)	12
f) Running household errands	10
g) Preparing meals	12
h) Child care (transportation, activities)	7
i) Pet care	5
j) Elder care	1
k) Planning family leisure activities	11
l) Household finances (bills and banking)	11
m) Other (please specify)	4

32. Do you feel that you are receiving adequate support from your spouse in terms of household responsibilities? **Total Responses: 13**

a) Yes	5
b) No	1
c) Partially	7

About your Spouse:

33. How long do you feel that it took for your spouse to transition successfully? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| a) Under 1 year | 1 |
| b) 1 – 2 years | 1 |
| c) 2 – 5 years | 4 |
| d) Over 5 years | 2 |
| e) Transition hasn't really ended | 5 |
| f) Don't know | |

34. How many years of service did your spouse complete prior to releasing? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| a) Less than 10 years | 1 |
| b) 10 to 20 years of service | 4 |
| c) 20 years and over | 8 |
| d) Don't know | 0 |

35. In which type of service did your spouse serve? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| a) Regular | 9 |
| b) Reserve | 2 |
| c) Both | 2 |
| d) Don't know | 0 |

36. In what branch of the CAF did your spouse serve? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| a) Army | 8 |
| b) Navy | 2 |
| c) Air Force | 1 |
| d) More than one | 2 |
| e) Don't know | 0 |

37. At the time of release was your spouse a(n): **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|----------------------------|----|
| a) Officer | 3 |
| b) Non-commissioned member | 10 |
| c) Don't know | 0 |

The Transition Process:

38. Overall, how difficult was your spouse's transition process for you? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| a) Very difficult | 6 |
| b) Moderately difficult | 5 |
| c) Neither difficult or easy | 1 |
| d) Moderately easy | 1 |
| e) Very easy | 0 |

39. What was most stressful for you and your family during the transition process?

Please rank your top 3 most stressful items.

Total Participants: 13 **Total Responses: 44**

- | | |
|---|----|
| a) Your health | 6 |
| b) Health issues of the Veteran | 11 |
| c) Maintaining financial security | 10 |
| d) Maintaining family stability | 8 |
| e) Engaging with friends or peer groups | 3 |
| f) Being understood by civilians | 2 |
| g) Military culture and stigma | 2 |
| h) Locating Family Doctor | 2 |

40. What were the most important sources of support for you during the transition process?

Please rank your top 3 most important items, with 1 being the most important.

Total Participants: 13 **Total Responses: 46**

- | | |
|---|----|
| a) Family | 11 |
| b) Friends | 8 |
| c) Parents | 6 |
| d) Children | 4 |
| e) Employer / co-workers | 2 |
| f) Pets or service animals | 5 |
| g) Support groups (in person) | 2 |
| h) Support groups (online) | 1 |
| i) Therapist, counselor or psychologist | 7 |

41. Do you feel that you had enough time to prepare for your spouse's release? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|--------|---|
| a) Yes | 4 |
| b) No | 9 |

42. Upon release, how prepared did you feel for your spouse's transition? **Total Responses: 13**

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| a) Very prepared | 1 |
| b) Somewhat prepared | 4 |
| c) Not very prepared | 5 |
| d) Not prepared at all | 3 |

CAF Transition Programming:

43. Did you personally access or are you currently accessing any formal CAF transition programming?

Total Responses:	13
a) Yes	4
b) No	7
c) Was not aware of any programs	2

44. Which CAF transition related programs did you access or are you currently accessing? *(Select all that apply)*

Total Participants who responded: 4	Frequency:
a) SCAN seminar	2
b) Integrated Personnel Support Centres (IPSC)	2
c) Operational Trauma and Stress Support Centres (OTSSCs)	0
d) Operational Stress Injury Social Support (OSISS)	2
e) Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC)	1
f) CF Spousal Education Upgrade Benefit	1
g) Attendant Care Benefit	0
h) Caregiver Assistance Benefit	0
i) Military Families Fund	1
j) Family Information Line	1
k) Canadian Forces Member Assistance Program	1
l) You're Not Alone – Guide to Connecting Military Family's to Mental Health and Social Wellness Programs	0
m) Mind's the Matter	0
n) Youth with Parents who have Experienced Trauma	0
o) None	0
p) Other (please specify)	2

45. How effective did you find the CAF transition programming you accessed? **Total Responses: 4**

a) Not effective	0
b) Somewhat effective	2
c) Effective	1
d) Very effective	1

VAC Transition Programming:

46. Did you personally access or are you currently accessing any formal VAC transition programming?

Total Responses:	13
a) Yes	3
b) No	7
c) Was not aware of any programs	2

47. Which VAC transition related programs did you access or are currently accessing? (Select all that apply)

	Total participants who responded: 3	Frequency:
a) VAC Transition Interview		1
b) Case Management		2
c) Rehabilitation Program		1
d) VAC Assistance Service		0
e) Operational Stress Injury (OSI) Clinic		2
f) Pastoral Outreach		0
g) None		0
h) Other (please specify)		0

48. How effective did you find the VAC transition programming and services you accessed in supporting your transition? **Total Responses: 3**

a) Not effective	1
b) Somewhat effective	1
c) Effective	1
d) Very effective	0
e) I didn't access any	0

Community Based Transition Programming:

49. Did you personally access or are you currently accessing any transition related programs or services that were offered in the community by non-profit groups or other levels of government? **Total Responses: 13**

a) Yes	1
b) No	8
c) Was not aware of any programs	4

50. Which ones? **Total Responses: 1**

- a) (Open ended): OSISS and Veterans Family Program

51. In general, how effective did you find them? **Total Responses: 1**

a) Not effective	0
b) Somewhat effective	1
c) Effective	0
d) Very effective	0
e) I didn't access any	0

Thank you for completing Phase I of this study. We will share the findings with you once we they have been compiled and analyzed. The second phase will include a focus group of up to 15 participants from Phase I. Participants with a variety of experiences and background will be selected.

We will confirm the participants by email by September 15th, 2018. Thank you for your participation.

Annex C – Focus Group Discussion Guide

Note - Some questions may be omitted based on answers provided earlier during the focus group or the cumulative saturation of the research themes in other interviews. **Probes may be used depending on the response to the initial answer. All probes may be modified by simply saying, “Can you tell me more about x”.**

Introduction (Facilitator):

- Thank you for participating in the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman’s research study, *Spouses Supporting Transition*. My name is Stephanie Constable and I work for Earncliffe Strategy Group. The OVO has hired me to facilitate this focus group. Joining me is team member from the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman as an observer and note taker.
- The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the lived experience of Spouses who support Veterans during the transition process.
- While you may not directly benefit from this study, a common understanding of the factors which result in successful integration into civilian life is essential to ensure that the policies, processes, programs and services are in place to achieve a successful transition and to monitor and measure effective outcomes on a continuous basis.
- This focus group will take the whole day and will include breaks and lunch. This study includes questions about your experience during transition to civilian life, including your challenges and positive experiences.
- Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you are uncomfortable answering a question or discussing a particular topic you welcome to pass or otherwise decline to respond. If you need to walk away or take a break, that is acceptable as well. We understand that this subject can be emotional and your well-being is important.
- If you wish to withdraw, you will be exempt from further questioning. You will then be asked if the information up until the point of withdrawal may be used in the study. If you do not wish us to include the data up until that point, the information will not be used and will be immediately destroyed through digital deletion and any hard-copies will be shredded.
- Your identity will remain confidential throughout this study. Your first or last name will not be made public and any personal documentation will be destroyed after completion of the project.
- Lastly, do you give your consent to have the interview recorded?

Ground Rules:

- The most important rule is that only one person speaks at a time. There may be a temptation to jump in when someone is speaking, but please wait until they are finished.
- There are no right or wrong answers
- You do not have to speak in any particular order
- When you have something to say, please do so. It is important that I obtain the views and opinions of everyone.
- You do not have to agree with the views and experiences of other people in the group

Warm Up:

- First, I'd like everyone to introduce themselves. Can you tell us your name?
- Since this is a focus group meant for discussing the lived experience of Spouses who were a part of supporting the Veteran's transition, let's just jump right in:

Theme 1 - The Role of the Spouse During Transition from Military to Civilian Life

1. I would like to start off by getting you to describe for us how was your life affected [during the transition]?
2. In general, tell me about transition from your perspective as a spouse.
Looking for:
 - *In what ways did the transition go smoothly (or well)?*
 - *What were some of the greatest challenges you faced?*

Other discussion points:

- I. How would you describe your personal employment experience during and after the transition process?
 - Did the transition process affect your employment?
 - How so? What did you do?
- II. Do you feel that your earning potential was affected by the transition process? In what ways?
- III. Did the transition affect your career or career aspirations in any way? IF YES, how so? What did you do or what have you done as a result?

Theme 2 - Formal and Informal Supports

3. What or who was your greatest source of support during the transition process?
4. What can you tell us about the types of supports that most helped you through the transition process? Were they formal or informal?
5. Some military members say that they did not ask for help with certain health challenges or participate in certain programs because of what others might think about them if they did. Looking back, was this a factor during your spouse's transition process? If so, how?
Looking for:
 - *Were there any programs or services that you wish you had taken advantage of but did not participate in because you were concerned about what others might think about you?*
 - *Was there anything that helped you be less concerned about what people might think of you if you told them what you were really going through?*
6. How easy or difficult has it been to make or maintain friendships with civilians, and how did these experiences help or hinder your experience with transition? How significant were civilians in the personal support networks you relied on during the transition process? In what ways?

Lunch Discussion:

7. What are the services your family currently needs or needed during transition that they are not getting?

Other topics to explore:

- What can you tell us about the role of Veteran's associations or informal Veteran peer groups in your transition process? How important were they in your transition and how did they help?
- Did you participate in any group programs to support you during the transition?
 - If not, why not?
 - Suggestions for making the programs more available and accessible to people
- Could you tell me about any community-based programs, services or resources that you accessed that were especially helpful? Which of these most helped you and why?
 - Did you access any web-based resources, apps, or social media sites that were particularly helpful to you? If so, what were they and why were they helpful?

Theme 3 – Preparing for Transition and Defining Success

8. What does successful transition look like to you?
 - *There may be some discussion on whether their Veterans successfully transitioned or not –it’s ok to allow some of this discussion. We really do want to know what “successful transition” means to Spouses.*

9. What can you say about the information that was available (or missing) to help prepare for your spouse’s transition?
Looking for:
 - *What was helpful? Did you feel like you got the right info at the right time?*
 - *What information do you wish you had been given but was not given to you?*
 - *If applicable, did you find that VAC personnel were knowledgeable and helpful?*
 - *If applicable, did you find that CAF personnel were knowledgeable and helpful?*

10. What was the most important activity that you did that helped you plan and prepare for the transition?
Did anybody help you to do this?

11. How long did it take to successfully re-integrate into civilian life?

Theme 4 – The Effect on the Spousal Relationship

12. How was your relationship affected, either positively or negatively, by transition?
Looking for:
 - *What sort of things changed?*
 - *What did you do to cope with these changes (if there were changes)?*
 - *What or who helped you to handle these changes?*

13. How have your household roles changed post-release?
Looking for:
 - *How household duties and the breakdown of responsibilities have changed post-release.*
 - *Are the Spouses responsible for more or fewer household chores? Have the delegation of tasks changed?*
 - *Have these changes in roles or duties had an effect on the spousal and familial relationships? How so?*

General Reflections:

14. In your opinion, what has been the most important factor contributing to the successful transition?

15. What do you think needs to be done to help support family members better during the transition process?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

17. If you knew then what you know now, what, if anything, would you do differently?

Conclusion:

- Thank you for participating. This has been a very successful discussion.
- Your opinions will be a valuable asset to the study and we hope you have found this discussion interesting.
- Just a reminder that any comments you have made during this group or the online questionnaire will be kept anonymous and your personal information will be kept confidential.