

# Spouses Supporting Transition

While medically-released Veterans may struggle with the military-to-civilian transition, having support from their spouses is a major contributing factor in ensuring a successful transition.

## INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman's (OVO) 2017 project, *Transitioning Successfully: A Qualitative Study*, identified spouses as one of the greatest sources of support for medically-released Veterans who self-identified as having successfully transitioned to civilian life. *Spouses Supporting Transition* seeks to better understand the lived experiences of spouses supporting Veterans through the transition process.

## METHODOLOGY

Begun in 2018, *Spouses Supporting Transition* is a qualitative study looking at the lived experiences of spouses of Canadian Veterans who medically released between 2006-2016.

**Phase I:** A comprehensive online survey focused on five areas:

- Family and Relationships;
- Employment;
- Household Roles;
- The Transition Process; and,
- Transition Programming.

**Phase II:** A professionally facilitated full-day focus group discussion that followed five themes:

- the participants' role in the transition process;
- formal and informal supports;
- services the family needed or currently needs;
- preparing for transition and defining success; and,
- the transition's effect on the spousal relationship.

Of the 13 survey respondents in Phase I, most were 40 years of age and over and lived in Ontario. None had served in the military themselves. Seven respondents took part in the Phase II focus group. Most of their Veteran spouses had served 20 plus years and were non-commissioned Army members.

*"Initially you are in crisis mode for months. You're still dealing with effects of stuff that happened 10, 15 years ago."*

## KEY FINDINGS

### Main Stressors and Supports

Top three most stressful aspects of the transition process:

- mental/physical health issues of the Veteran;
- financial security; and,
- family stability.

Top three most important sources of support:

- family;
- friends; and,
- counsellors/therapists.

Service dogs and pets in general both received positive mention.

### Effects on Employment

Most participants' employment was affected by the transition in one of the following ways:

- having to stay home as a part or full-time caregiver;
- moving; or,
- increased household responsibilities that made full-time or regular employment impossible.
  - 54.5% of respondents reported increased household responsibility.

Some participants discussed not being able to ask their spouses for certain kinds of help either because the Veterans were overwhelmed by the impact of the transition or due to the Veterans' physical or mental health barriers.

### Preference for Non-Profit Support Services

Few participants accessed Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) or Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) services and, of those who did, they reported the programs were only somewhat to moderately effective. Participants preferred supports delivered by non-profit organizations or third parties. Participants were either unaware of CAF/VAC services, or found them to be confusing and contradictory which aggravated the Veteran's mental health and recovery. In general, participants felt that the government does not understand the needs of the modern medically-released Veteran.

### Stigma, Help-seeking, and Defining Success

Many participants mentioned stigma around accessing services, appealing decisions, or seeking counselling for mental health issues. Notably, the participants all had differing definitions of "success" as it pertained to the transition process. Many characterized their transition as ongoing.

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



## FAMILY

Ten of the participant/Veteran couples had children. Fifteen of the 22 children were under 18 years of age. Two children was the average per couple.

*"The kids know Dad's fuse is short. They come to me for everything, I am the constant"*  
- Focus Group Participant (FGP)



## EMPLOYMENT

Pre-release, most participants were employed and of those, 75% were working full-time; 75% of previously employed participants were not working in the same job that they had pre-release; and 66.7% of participants confirmed that their employment was affected by their spouse's transition.

*"It hurt my resume, jumping from job to job. My opportunities are now limited"* - FGP



## TRANSITION

38.5% of participants stated that their spouse's transition has not really ended. When asked how difficult the Veteran's transition process was for the participants, 84.6% of respondents found the transition process to be difficult in varying degrees.

*"It has taken about four years. Our transition is still ongoing, but we are on the upswing instead of the downward spiral now."* - FGP

## TOP THREE STRESSORS



### HEALTH ISSUES

*"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."* - FGP



### FINANCIAL SECURITY

*"Try making a \$90k disability award last for 40 years."*

*"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."* - FGP



### FAMILY STABILITY

*"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."* - FGP

## TOP THREE SUPPORTS



### FAMILY

*"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."* - FGP



### FRIENDS

*"With my best friend, it has been easy for me. She doesn't understand everything, but I just need her to listen."*

*"My soul sister. She's my best friend, my emotional support."* - FGP



### COUNSELLORS/ THERAPISTS

*"The counselling really saved our marriage."*

*"The counselling really helped slow things down for me."*

*"The mental health support has strengthened our marriage."* - FGP

## CONCLUSIONS

- Proactive, mandatory mental health services to military members/Veterans and their families throughout transition would have benefited many of the participants and their families.
- Consultation with Veterans and their families who accessed programs and benefits through non-profit organizations could shed light on best-practices and help to improve awareness and the accessibility of programs offered by CAF/VAC.
- Veterans and their spouses may define successful transition differently. Understanding these differences could help inform future policy and program design.

- More research is required to:
  - fully understand how transition can impact spouses' employment, and
  - identify improvements to programs and services that will minimize the effects of transition on spouses' employment.
- Future research on the experience of spouses and families during transition would ideally be undertaken with larger sample sizes and a more diverse population.



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*\*La version française est disponible sur demande*

The complete report will be made available by early 2020. Visit [ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca](http://ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca) to learn more.