



Remarks before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

***Ralph Mahar – Executive Officer, RCMP Veterans' Association
Monday, February 4, 2019 – 1530 Hrs***

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Members of this ***Standing Committee of Veterans Affairs*** for your invitation to the **RCMP Veterans' Association** to appear before you today, respecting the critical issue of homeless Veterans.

My name is Ralph Mahar. I am the Executive Officer of the RCMP Veteran's Association. I report to our President, Steve Walker, and to the Association's national elected Board of Directors; all RCMP Veterans in their own right.

I support our Board in achieving the strategic priorities that they have jointly established with our membership, and together with our Executive Assistant, Mme Chantal Renaud, we do our best to serve our Veterans every day.

I am proud to be a Veteran of the RCMP. I served in the RCMP from 1974 to 1984 performing general policing, highway patrol and national security duties in Manitoba and Ontario. After leaving the Force, I continued my career within the national security / public safety establishment in Canada retiring in 2007.

For the past 12 years, I have continued to work within the private and public sector, in fields including support to the Canadian military, and as a peace officer within the Ministry of the Attorney General of Ontario. I have served as Executive Officer for the RCMP Veterans' Association since October 2017.

Our Association had its origins in 1886 only 13 years after the establishment of the North-West Mounted Police in 1873. It has matured and evolved over the past 133 years, and since 2014, we have been incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation under the **Canada Not-For-Profit Corporations Act**.

We have 30 Divisions across the country with almost 7000 members, in large cities and smaller communities; from Vancouver Island, to Whitehorse, to Newfoundland and Labrador and many points in between; Prince Albert, Lethbridge, Kingston, Kamloops, Montreal, Fredericton, Charlottetown, Thunder Bay and Halifax to name a few.

Our Association offers membership to former RCMP members and employees – both sworn officers and civilians – who served with the Force. Many of our members will have served an entire career with the Force of 25, 35 or more years. Many others served for shorter periods of time, and moved on to other career paths, within law enforcement or in other fields.

Our purpose and objectives are articulated within our constitution, and they include;

- to promote and assist in the promotion and advancement of the best interests of Canada;
- to be of service to the Government of Canada when required and requested;

- to co-operate with and to render assistance to the Police, especially the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, in all matters of common interest or concern;
- to promote the physical, social and economic welfare of the Association's members or the members of their immediate families; and
- to provide support to worthy community services or organizations of a charitable or benevolent nature.

In achieving our objectives, our strength is our members.

Our members bring energy, commitment, diverse experience and talent to the volunteer roles they perform within the Association.

They devote tens of thousands of hours annually in support of worthwhile causes and for the good of the Association.

Across the breadth of our Association, our members are actively involved in many good works within their communities.

This includes advocacy and support for our Veterans, their families and surviving spouses, to assist them in understanding the range of benefits they may be eligible for if they are suffering from a service-related injury or illness.

We offer guidance to our Veterans in helping them be aware of the resources and groups within their communities that are providing physical and mental health services.

We visit RCMP Veterans and surviving spouses who are in hospital, care homes, or in their residences, if their mobility is impaired, and they are amenable to seeing old friends and colleagues.

We support our members and their families at the time of bereavement when a Veteran dies, by attending celebrations of life to show respect and gratitude for their service to Canada.

We serve as honour guards if the family requests.

We offer information to surviving spouses to help them navigate this difficult time, through a ***Guide for Survivors and Executors*** prepared in close consultation with the RCMP that identifies survivor benefits, and explains the responsibilities of executors. The Guide is regularly updated to keep it current.

Our Divisions are also actively involved in supporting communities and charitable causes through fundraising in the form of charity golf tournaments, as volunteer international couriers of bone marrow donations in collaboration with the Bruce Denniston Society, by collecting and shipping toys to northern communities in need at Christmas time, and a host of other ways.

We participate in RCMP events, to honour and celebrate the history of the Force, and to ensure that our history is told, understood and respected, and recorded for future generations.

Our members are deeply proud of their service with the RCMP, and are grateful for the incredible work done today by the men and women of the RCMP, as they serve and protect Canadians.

We maintain a close and collaborative relationship with the RCMP in every region of the country. As stated within our objectives, we remain ready to render assistance to the RCMP – and other police forces – on matters of common interest and concern.

We are well aware of the challenges facing police personnel and front-line officers, as we have walked that walk ourselves.

That said, we appreciate that the demands upon police officers is ever increasing, and the complexity of the investigative environment is also evolving a rapid pace. It is a heavy burden that they bear.

The plight of homeless veterans is deeply felt by our Association.

We have been considering ways that we can be supportive in an effective and sustainable way.

We have participated in focused dialogue on homeless veterans in roundtable forums hosted by **Veterans Affairs Canada**. We have met with organizations such as **VETS Canada, Soldiers Helping Soldiers, the Royal Canadian Legion** and recently with the **Respect Forum** to educate ourselves, to learn about what they are doing, and potentially to find ways to collaborate.

The RCMP Veterans' Association was proud to be a supporting sponsor of the **Veterans House** Gala hosted by **Multifaith Housing Initiative** (MHI) in Ottawa this past September 2018, as they raise money to build Veterans House, a 40-unit residential center for homeless veterans, and veterans at risk upon the grounds of the former CFB Rockcliffe.

Veterans House is an inspired initiative that will provide homeless veterans with a safe and welcoming place to find peace, and to recover. We wish MHI and their strategic partners every success as this incredible project proceeds to completion.

Our Association has also supported **VETS Canada's Guitars for Vets** initiative through ticket purchases for their 2017 concert at Algonquin College.

Our capacity to provide direct financial assistance to homeless veterans, however, is limited. Our Association is financially supported by our dues-paying members, and supplemented by some funding from a few generous sponsors.

We don't have deep pockets. Our annual revenues closely match our annual expenses and discretionary spending is modest at best.

We're grateful for our dialogue with significant players within this environment, such as VETS Canada, which has a decade of experience and a legacy of substantive contribution and active help to homeless veterans, and veterans at risk.

VETS Canada's establishment this past year of the drop-in centre in Ottawa, and their partnership with the Province of Alberta in the establishment of the Veterans Service Centre in Edmonton offers safe places, active support and hope for veterans who are struggling.

We intend to be a helpful partner with others in support of homeless and *at-risk* veterans. But given our limited financial capacity, while we have participated in initiatives for the broader Veteran community, our direct efforts have been, and will remain to be focused more exclusively upon RCMP Veterans who are struggling, who have experienced homelessness or who are at risk.

This makes sense because RCMP Veterans are not eligible for support through programs such as the ***Veterans Emergency Fund*** established by Veterans Affairs Canada to support homeless or *at-risk* veterans.

The Veterans Emergency Fund was established to provide emergency funds to military veterans in immediate need of food, clothing, rent, mortgage, medical care and other expenses to maintain safety and

shelter. But RCMP Veterans who have emergency needs do not have access to these funds.

The incidence of RCMP veterans who are homeless or at risk is negligible, but not non-existent. There have been cases, including recent ones. And there will continue to be cases in the future.

As an Association, our knowledge of RCMP Veterans in need of support is reliant upon being informed of cases when they exist.

That knowledge may come to us from a Veterans Affairs Canada Case Officer who is in contact with the Veteran.

It might be from a friend or former colleague, but rarely by the veteran themselves.

It is fair to say that we don't have an accurate assessment of the number of RCMP Veterans at risk. While we expect the incidence is low, it is also likely under-reported.

We became aware - after the fact - of one tragic case of an RCMP Veteran who died of exposure in a harsh winter while living in his vehicle in 2015, after being evicted from a low-income property. The veteran had served 20 years with the Force and took his discharge in the early 1970's. His life later unravelled and he hit bottom almost 40 years after he left the RCMP.

When our Association learned of his death, we collaborated with RCMP and the local funeral home to afford him a dignified laying of rest. He was subsequently buried at the RCMP Cemetery at Depot Division, Regina.

We mourn his tragic passing, and wish that we had known of his struggles earlier, so that we might have been able to offer help, if he were willing to accept it.

The primary source of financial support that the RCMP Veterans' Association can potentially extend to RCMP Veterans in need is through the administration of a \$50,000 allotment of benevolent funds made available to the RCMP Veterans' Association by the RCMP.

Entitled the ***RCMP Benefit Trust Fund***, as stated within Royal Canadian Mounted Police Regulations, 2014, regulations permit the RCMP to grant funds to the RCMP Veterans' Association to *"to maintain a program to seek out and assist former members and their dependants under terms and conditions set out by the advisory committee"*.

When our Association becomes aware that a former member or their dependants are in financial distress, we can engage the member / dependant to assess their needs, and extend defined and reasonable financial support.

This program has provided meaningful and welcome assistance and relief to RCMP Veterans for many years, and our Association is grateful to the RCMP for making a portion of the fund available for Veterans and dependants, and for entrusting our Association with its administration.

Understandably, there is an assessment process that takes time, and criteria that must be met for the extension of financial support. While the financial support extended can – and has – proved critical to a recipient in supporting them in dignity, it is not designed for emergency response.

In reality, Veterans are often very reluctant to reach out for assistance. Their needs are often acute and immediate; particularly for emergency transitional accommodations. If our Association is unable to respond quickly, there is great likelihood that the veteran will lose hope and refuse further contact, putting them at risk and rendering them desperate.

The Veterans Emergency Fund is ideally suited to these kinds of immediate demands. Our Association will be writing to the ***Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould*** asking that the criteria for the Fund be broadened to include RCMP Veterans.

In a similar vein, our Association was very pleased to learn of the creation of the ***Veterans and Family Well-Being Fund*** established in the spring of 2018 to provide grants and contributions to private, public or academic organizations to conduct research and implement initiatives and projects that support the well-being of Veterans and their families.

The type of projects that the fund was designed to support included such things as suicide prevention research, or initiatives to help homeless Veterans find housing, or any innovative project that contributes to the well-being of Veterans and their families.

Our Association submitted a sophisticated proposal seeking to conduct research upon the ***RCMP's International Peace Operations*** program over its 30-year history, to interview deployed personnel and their spouses, to determine their experiences, and to learn about the impact those operations had upon their physical and mental health.

Admittedly, these peace operations in Haiti, Kosovo, Afghanistan and other venues have been challenging. Our objective in part was to record oral histories of those experiences, and make that product available to the RCMP, historians and the public.

Our proposal would have resulted in an historical public record and an accompanying documentary film, to acknowledge the contributions of these deployed RCMP personnel, and of their families. In honouring their contribution, we believed it would certainly support the ‘well-being of Veterans and their families’.

There were over 100 submissions to Veterans Affairs Canada seeking funding. Twenty-two outstanding organizations were approved for funding and most certainly, their work will benefit Veterans and their families.

While we were disappointed not to be chosen, we were much more substantially disappointed to learn that our proposal was rejected from the outset as being ineligible, as RCMP do not have the same status of Veteran within existing legislation.

Certainly, RCMP personnel in deployed peace operations face the same risks, and are subject to the same challenges as many of our military colleagues do. In many instances, RCMP and Canadian military are co-deployed. Their deployments are of comparable duration, and their families at home in Canada experience the same dislocation, worry and loneliness, and often the burden of single-parenting while their spouse is in a risky theatre of operation.

Our Association will also be petitioning Minister Wilson-Raybould to reconsider the eligibility of RCMP Veterans for submissions for grants and contributions to the Veteran and Family Well-Being Fund.

Recently, the Prime Minister appointed **Mr. Craig Dalton** as the **Veterans Ombudsman** to succeed **Mr. Guy Parent** who served with great integrity in that capacity for the past 7 years. The RCMP Veterans’ Association has the deepest respect for Mr. Parent and are

very grateful for his service to Canada, both during his time in the Canadian Forces, and as Ombudsman.

We welcome the appointment of Mr. Dalton to this critical position. Considering his long and distinguished career in the Canadian Forces, and his considerable experience with the Governments of New Brunswick & Prince Edward Island as Deputy Minister of several portfolios including Public Safety, Social Development, and Family and Human Services, he is eminently well-qualified to understand and represent Veterans. We wish him the very best in his new post.

Our Association was proud to have one of our ***Past Presidents, Dave Leblanc***, serve upon Mr. Parent's Advisory Committee and are equally proud that our most recent ***Past President Al Rivard*** has been invited to sit upon Mr. Dalton's ***Advisory Committee***. Mr. Rivard looks forward to working with Mr. Dalton and will ensure that the perspective of RCMP Veterans is articulated with clarity and integrity.

This concludes my prepared comments. Thank you again for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the RCMP Veterans' Association on homeless veterans, and I welcome any questions you may have.

