

Veterans upset with office closings

By Kaitlin Abeele

Canadian veterans are at war once more, this time with their own government.

Eight Veterans Affairs offices were closed on Friday, despite overwhelming opposition from veterans across Canada, who staged protests outside the offices on the day of the closures.

The Conservative government announced in June that they would be cutting back the number of jobs within Veterans Affairs Canada, followed by the announcement that they would be closing nine Veterans Affairs offices across Canada by early 2014.

The office in Prince George, B.C. was first on the chopping block, which closed earlier this month followed by eight more closures Jan. 31. The Trenton office remains open.

There are currently 750,000 veterans in Canada, and 110,000 men and women currently serving in the military and the RCMP, all of whom rely on Veterans Affairs Canada for help with a variety of issues, including physical and mental injuries.

Frank Luxford, a member of the Trenton Legion, served for 25 years in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and his brother John is a Second World War veteran living in Windsor. Luxford said he fears that his brother will no longer receive the help he needs now that the Windsor office has closed.

"He had to have surgery and he had to go all the way from Windsor to London, Ont. to get the work done. And now, they're closing the Windsor office, and in order to get any assistance, he's going to have to go all the way to London. And because he is 89, he has lost his driver's licence," said Luxford.

Another Trenton Legion member, Don Ferguson, served for 11 years in the Canadian Forces in Egypt and Cyprus. Ferguson became choked up when asked about the closures of the offices.

"I think the veterans are mistreated very...I get emotional when I talk about this. There's not enough being done, especially for the young ones that are coming back from Afghanistan and Bosnia, you know, where they really have a problem mentally," said Ferguson, his eyes watering and a single tear trailing down his face.

The reason given for the closures was that the chosen offices were not in high use.

'The people running Veterans Affairs are not military. They don't know what we go through. When they cut services, they don't know the effect it has on us.'

Veteran Harry Van Stijn

and that Service Canada offices and online services would better serve veterans.

But older veterans may not have access to a computer at home, or simply don't know how to navigate the Veterans Affairs website. And someone coping with post-traumatic stress disorder may not want help online.

Another major concern of veterans is that in-home visits will become few and far between with the loss of 89 employees, which is not an option for older veterans or those dealing with trauma such as PTSD. Veterans Affairs Canada promised to take one employee from each of the closing offices and to relocate them in the closest Service Canada office, which will mean that eight employees will be in charge of the 17,000 veterans that were previously overseen by the now closed offices.

Veterans Affairs Canada promises to keep in-home visits available for those that require them.

"Regardless of where veterans live, they can continue to rely on home visits from registered nurses and their Veterans Affairs case managers for those that require them," said Simon Forsyth, a media relations officer for Veterans Affairs Canada.

As well, many veterans that are older or have a physical or mental trauma are unable to travel, especially long distances, which has become a reality now that the local VA offices have closed. Veterans in Corner Brook, Nfld., one of the eight offices that closed on Friday, have an eight-hour commute to St. John's to access the next closest VA office.

Not every veteran is in complete opposition to the closures. John Evans served 27 years in the military. Evans said he understands the Conservatives' need to cut spending because of fiscal restraint, and that means closing offices that don't have the required clientele. He worries that if the Liberals take over after the next general election in 2015, military spending will be cut drastically and in turn will affect Veterans Affairs.

"I don't support some of the things I've seen with veterans, but since I got out of the military and needed assistance from Veterans Affairs itself, they've served me greatly. And I have nothing but fine words for Veterans Affairs the way they are right now," said Evans.

Still, there seems to be more opposition to the closures than support from veterans.

Harry Van Stijn served in heavy artillery for five years and is almost completely deaf in both ears as a result. He has an explanation for why the closures were suggested in the first place.

"The people running Veterans Affairs are not military. They don't know what we go through. When they cut services, they don't know the effect it has on us.

"I'm not getting rewarded for what I lost."

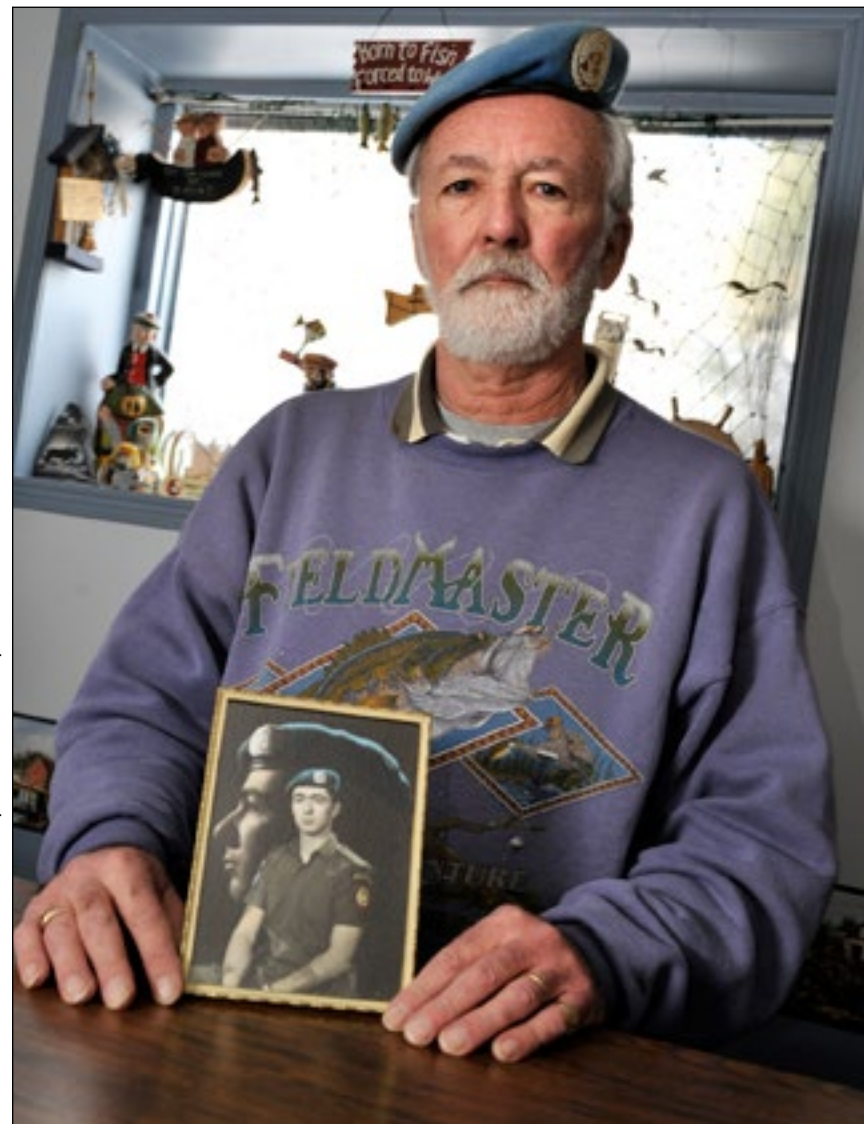


Photo by Kaitlin Abeele

Don Ferguson, who served for 11 years in the military and is a 50-year member of the Trenton Legion, said he is very distressed by the closing of eight Veterans Affairs offices across Canada.

Getting cold in support of those who don't have a home



Photo by Justin Chin

From left, Barker Waswa, 14, Tyler Prinzen, 14, and Jordan Olson, 14, participate at the Sleep Out! So Others Can Sleep In event on Friday in Belleville. They were among 50 people who spent the night outside in the cold weather under cardboard instead of the comfort of their beds to help raise awareness of those who are homeless and raise money for mental health.

Belleville's Market Square site of box forts to raise awareness of homelessness

By Dayna Lefebvre

More than 100 people crowded in box forts in Belleville's Market Square Friday night during the Canadian Mental Health Association's Sleep Out! So Others Can Sleep In.

Everyone was bundled to withstand the -10 C weather – a reality faced each winter by many homeless Canadians.

The annual sleep out, which is in its seventh year, raises funds and awareness for mental health and homelessness in the area.

This year, it raised \$13,320 – surpassing the goal of \$10,000 – which will go towards repair, maintenance and supplies to the three housing programs in four transition shelters for those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in the Belleville area.

According to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, in 2010 there were 511 people in Belleville living on the streets, and another 955 at risk of becoming homeless.

Despite the loud pumping music, the seriousness of the issue was not

lost among the participants.

"To know how others feel, you have to feel it yourself," said Amy-Lynn Boyle, a 15-year-old student from Trenton High School. "It's so powerful that so many people care enough. It's cold, but people want to embrace the cold and be part of something."

Participants made box forts, danced to music and participated in awareness-raising exercises throughout the night.

"What better way to get out there and participate," said Jennifer Cotnam, a teacher at Trenton High School. "The thing is, though, we are here by choice. It's one night. It's good energy here, but it's humbling and quite sad to know that for people who are homeless... this is not a choice. It's their reality. This is great for education – that's why we're here."

Sandie Sidsworth, the executive director of the CMHA's Hastings-Prince Edward branch, explained her personal resonance that makes this work so important to her.

"My mother suffered from mental health issues and she was very brave in her struggle," Sidsworth explained. "I've been a poverty advocate for over 30 years so this just makes sense for me. We do housing and food security and making sure people are okay. This is all part and parcel of it."

For another look at this story, go to: <http://www.qnetnews.ca/?p=34008>

Family deciding whether to keep livestock

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Both the Byfords are considering giving the livestock up, but never the farm.

"Do you rebuild? You don't know what to do. It's all so stressful. We're going to have to wait and see what's good for us, we don't want to be in debt the rest of our lives," added Shirley.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about what's next. I'm pretty much about done. I'm almost 65, I ain't no young chicken, farms a tough old go, and if you don't have a good income you're euchred. And we're not getting any help from the government. They don't have any money to give us in their programs. This has discouraged me, that's what it does."

Byford's insurance will only cover the cost of cleaning up after the fire.

All the remains of the barn and hay will be piled up and left to decompose for at least three years.



Photo by Justin Greaves

Chris Byford feeds the five-month-old lambs, now motherless, at his farm on Bethel Road. The Saturday fire in Prince Edward County, caused an estimated \$400,000 in damage.