

In Defence of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board:

A Rebuttal and a Call for Government Action on VAC Underfunding

By Commander (ret'd) James P. Hutton, rmc, CD, BSc, MSc, MBA.

A recent CBC article titled [*“Veterans board grants or improves benefits in 9 of 10 cases reviewed”*](#) questions the integrity of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), suggesting that its high approval rate is a sign of political interference or leniency. The article implies that a 90% rate of granting or improving benefits must stem either from widespread errors at Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) or from bias in the appeal system. It gives disproportionate weight to the latter interpretation—accusing VRAB of overreach—while barely examining whether the root problem lies in VAC’s initial adjudications.

This paper addresses that imbalance, not only by reaffirming the legitimacy of VRAB’s function, but by underscoring the **real issues: systemic failure to apply the Act and Regulations correctly at the first level of adjudication, and chronic underfunding and resourcing shortfalls at VAC**. Rather than scapegoating the Board that is tasked with correcting adjudicators’ errors, Canadians should demand more accountability at the first level, and urgent increases in federal to restore integrity to the disability benefits system.

The Real Problem Lies with Under-Resourced Processes

The high rate of VRAB reversals is not proof of its bias—it’s evidence of a **broken front-end system** that consistently fails to provide fair and accurate disability assessments. The report by Veterans with Cancer Inc., [*“Improving Assessment Consistency for Veterans,”*](#) exposed deep flaws in the assessment phase of VAC’s benefits process. Although this stage is meant to be objective,—using standardized guidance from the Table of Disabilities—VAC decisions are plagued by lack of consistency and coherence. Our report found that **91.5% of veterans who appealed had their assessments increased** by VRAB. This is not a statistical anomaly; it is a sign of a systemic failure that eats up time and precious resources

A significant issue in achieving fair and consistent findings is chronic underfunding and a lack of properly trained adjudicators. The department is overwhelmed by a 92% surge in disability claims in recent years, all while operating under a government-mandated three-year financial restraint directive. **The system is not designed to function under this volume without added investment**. Staff are stretched thin, timelines are compressed, and quality suffers—veterans pay the price.

Worse still, this dysfunction is set to deepen. [*VAC’s projected budget*](#) is facing an \$11.5 million reduction in fiscal year 2026–27. Cutting resources at a time of rising demand is not fiscally responsible—it is **morally indefensible**. It guarantees more inaccurate assessments, more appeals, and more unnecessary suffering for the people who have already sacrificed for their country.

The Role of VRAB: *Not Bias, But Safety Net*

Despite the CBC’s insinuations, VRAB is not undermining VAC; rather, it is protecting veterans from an under-resourced bureaucracy. VRAB decisions are guided by legal precedent, medical evidence, and the legislated benefit-of-the-doubt standard—a principle that exists precisely because of the challenges veterans face in

proving service-related injury decades after their service. Its 90% approval rate does not reflect political interference, but the **sheer volume of wrong decisions that need to be corrected**.

To argue that this rate proves bias is to misdiagnose the disease and blame the symptom. VRAB is functioning exactly as intended—what’s broken is the first point of contact for veterans seeking benefits.

Underfunding VAC: A Policy Failure with Real Consequences

The consequences of underfunding are anything but abstract. In its follow-up report, [*“Failing Those Who Served,”*](#) Veterans with Cancer Inc. documented a case study of one veteran whose assessment was severely underrated—an error that set off a chain reaction affecting extended timelines, financial support and the need for yet another VRAB Review. This is not a one-off case; it is emblematic of systemic dysfunction. All too often, this dysfunction leads to Veterans giving up on the system and forgoing benefits to which they are entitled.

Reframing the Public Narrative

The CBC article’s framing is not only misleading—it is damaging. By casting suspicion on VRAB’s role, it distracts from the true problem and risks undermining trust in the only mechanism many veterans have to correct bureaucratic errors.

The real scandal is not VRAB’s correction rate—it is that the government has allowed the initial assessment process to degrade through years of financial neglect and a lack of accountability. This is not a story about a board run amok; it is a story about **a department set up to fail by insufficient political will and resourcing**.

A Call to Action: Invest in the Front End

Canada owes its veterans more than just remembrance and rhetoric. It owes them a system that works the first time. That means properly funding the assessment process, staffing it adequately, training decision-makers rigorously, and ensuring consistency across the board. The solution is not to criticize VRAB for fulfilling its mandate; it is to fix the broken system that sends veterans there in the first place.

We offer the following recommendations to the new government:

- Reverse the planned \$11.5 million cuts to VAC in 2026–27;
- Increase core funding to match the 92% increase in claims;
- increase the number of adjudicators accordingly;
- require VAC adjudicators to acknowledge and apply precedence to their decisions, including any findings from the VRAB, as articulated by the [Minister in his letter to Veterans with Cancer](#)
- Invest in decision-maker training, with an emphasis on applying both the letter and the spirit of the Act and Regulations correctly;
- Create performance benchmarks for adjudicators tied to consistency and fairness, not just speed.

Conclusion

VRAB's high rate of favorable decisions is not evidence of misconduct—it is evidence of **system that is failing at the first level**. If anything, it should serve as an indictment of how far VAC has strayed from its mandate to serve those who served.

Until the federal government properly funds the initial stages of the disability benefits process, the VRAB will continue to be swamped with cases that should be properly decided in the first instance. But that is not how a just system should function. We should not need a backstop—we should get it right the first time.

Veterans deserve more than a lifeboat after drowning in red tape. They deserve a system that **prioritizes their well-being with the funding and expertise necessary to deliver timely, consistent, and fair decisions**. That starts with reinvesting in Veterans Affairs Canada—now.

Sources:

- CBC News: "[Veterans board grants or improves benefits in 9 of 10 cases reviewed](#)"
- Veterans with Cancer Inc.: "[Improving Assessment Consistency for Veterans](#)"
- Veterans with Cancer Inc.: "[Failing Those Who Served: A Case Study of a Broken Assessment Process](#)"
- Departmental plan at a glance 2024-2025: [Departmental plan at a glance 2024–2025 | Veterans Affairs Canada](#)
- Veterans Review and Appeal Board. "[A Guide to Review and Appeal Hearings](#)."
- Canadian Legal Information Institute (CanLII). [VRAB Decisions Database](#).
- Parliamentary Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. "[Restoring Confidence in The Veterans Review and Appeal Board](#)" (2012).



***Veterans With Cancer Inc.** is a Canadian not-for-profit veterans' advocacy group founded by veterans Randall "Randy" Hladun, James "Jim" Hutton, and Donald "Don" MacPhail. All three men, diagnosed with prostate cancer, believe their illness is linked to past military exposure to toxic chemicals—most notably Carbon Tetrachloride (CTC), a cleaning solvent used extensively in trades such as sonar techs, fire control, and electricians during service (espritdecorps.ca).*

The organization's mission is threefold:

1. **Raise awareness** about the link between military chemical exposure and cancer.
2. **Advocate** for faster claim recognition and support from Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), including group-based claims and shared medical evidence, to reduce individual burdens
3. **Push for systemic change**, urging VAC to adopt precedents in its decisions and to follow models like the U.S. PACT Act that presume certain cancers are service-related once exposure is confirmed.

The group has engaged directly with VAC leadership, including the chair of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, requesting both expedited executive policy directives and longer-term legislative reforms to the Veterans Well-Being Act. They have published discussion papers, which can be found on their website. (www.veteranswithcancer.com).

Overall, Veterans with Cancer Inc. works to shine a light on environmental cancer exposures in the Canadian Armed Forces, support individual veterans in their claims, and legislate structural policy change to ensure fair, timely recognition for those whose service has long-term health consequences