The Honourable Jill McKnight
Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

June 25, 2025

Dear Minister McKnight,

Re: Submission of Policy Paper – *"In Defence of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board"*

I am writing to share with you the enclosed policy paper titled *"In Defence of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board: A Rebuttal and a Call for Government Action on VAC Underfunding."* This paper is a direct response to recent media coverage that has cast doubt on the impartiality of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB) while overlooking the deeper issue: systemic failure at the first level of adjudication due to persistent underfunding and resource shortfalls at Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC).

As someone with lived experience navigating VAC's disability assessment system, I believe it is critical that public narratives reflect the full context. The high rate of successful appeals is not evidence of leniency at VRAB, but of a front-end process that has been structurally weakened by insufficient funding, rising claim volumes, and inadequate staffing.

This paper outlines not only why VRAB's integrity must be defended, but also offers concrete policy recommendations for restoring fairness and consistency to VAC's assessment processes. These include reversing planned budget cuts, investing in staff capacity, and creating performance benchmarks that prioritize quality and accuracy over speed.

Minister, I respectfully urge you to consider the findings and recommendations detailed in this paper as part of your ongoing mandate to improve outcomes for Canada's veterans. Too many have already paid the price for a system that cannot keep pace with demand. The solution is not to undermine the appeal mechanism—it is to fix what necessitates its use in the first place.

Thank you for your continued service to Canada's veterans. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further, should you or your office wish to follow up.

Sincerely,

Commander (ret'd) James P. Hutton rmc, CD, BSc, MSc, MBA
Director, Veterans with Cancer Inc.

Attachment: Policy Paper: *In Defence of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board*

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 seeks to correct that imbalance, not only by reaffirming the legitimacy of VRAB's function, but by underscoring the **real issue**: **systemic failure at the first level of adjudication due to chronic underfunding and resourcing shortfalls at VAC**. Rather than scapegoating the Board tasked with correcting injustices, Canadians should demand urgent increases in federal funding 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—the results are anything but consistent. The report found that **91.5% of veterans who appealed had their assessments increased** by VRAB. This is not a statistical anomaly; it is systemic failure.

VAC's inability to render consistent assessments is not the result of incompetence, but of capacity. 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; 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 influence, but the **sheer volume of wrongs that need to be righted**.

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. I encourage readers to examine the case study closely to understand how an under-resourced assessment system and overburdened staff create conditions ripe for such failures.

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 the public 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. 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.

The government must:

- Reverse the planned $11.5 million cuts to VAC in 2026–27;

- Increase core funding to match the 92% increase in claims;

- Invest in decision-maker training and hiring to reduce the error rate at the assessment phase;

- Create performance benchmarks 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 **compensatory justice** in a failing system. 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 meets its obligations by properly funding the initial stages of the disability benefits process, VRAB will remain the last line of defence for fairness. 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 government that **prioritizes their well-being with the funding 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).

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

James Hutton began his career in the Canadian Navy in 1968, serving as an electronics technician aboard multiple HMC ships, including NATO deployments. Selected for commissioning, he earned a BSc from the Royal Military College, followed by a master's degree in Applied Physics from the University of Victoria, and later pursued systems engineering studies. Rising to the rank of Commander, he played a key role in naval systems engineering, software policy, and shipbuilding, notably overseeing west coast operations for the Navy's $10B fleet renewal program. After retiring in 1997, he transitioned to public service, introducing early dispute resolution initiatives, and later served in senior administrative roles in higher education, including Vice-President Finance & Administration at Cambrian College. Now retired in Owen Sound, he remains active in community and business mentorship.