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Families of wounded military veterans struggle to cope

By Bill Graveland, THE CANADIAN PRESS

CALGARY - They are the invisible victims of Canada's military efforts around the world.

The families of wounded soldiers released from active duty due to severe disabilities are poorer, less healthy and less socially active, says a study prepared for Veterans Affairs Canada.

It's a growing problem as Canadian soldiers continue to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan and help keep the peace in global hot spots.

Soldiers who can no longer serve in the military receive full pensions, but the University of Alberta study suggests their families still struggle.

A Canada-wide review involved 142 wounded soldiers and 115 of their caretakers and paints a painful picture of what life is like at home.

"I tend to try to be positive, not negative, (but) ... I feel robbed because all our lives he has been ill, can't sit, walk, or stand too long," wrote one of the anonymous respondents.

The soldiers surveyed were between 25 and 65, were suffering full impairment to most of their bodies and were often battling emotional, psychiatric and psychological conditions.

The study found financial pressures and an overwhelming and relentless sense of responsibility for the caregiver.

"You don't dwell on it. You ... try to think of something good every day. You just try to keep going," wrote another woman. A few years ago I had to write a letter to Veterans Affairs and I thought, 'Oh my God. This is my life.'"

The report, titled "Wounded Veterans, Wounded Families," revealed high levels of need for the severely disabled veterans and their families, many of whom were also trying to earn a living and raise young children.

"Are they suffering? Absolutely. And suffering in ways that their lives have been changed," said Norah Keating, a professor of human ecology, who co-authored the report with colleague Janet Fast.

"They're less connected to their families and friends as they try to deal with this illness and they're having financial difficulties, even though the department provides much higher levels of income support than someone injured outside of the military," she said in an interview with The Canadian Press.

"It could be pretty overwhelming to say goodbye to your spouse, and he comes back with multiple disabilities. That means really rearranging your life in terms of work, care for children, finances and all the rest."

An official with Veterans Affairs said the department has 121,412 cases where soldiers have been granted either a disability pension or disability award. Just under 2,800 of those were injured while serving in Afghanistan - 178 of them women.

Keating acknowledges the military takes good care of its veterans, but she also believes the system falls flat because benefits flow through the disabled soldier and not directly to families. That means if a wife or child needs emergency counselling or some other assistance, a case has to be made directly to Veterans Affairs.

"They are making us feel like beggars who are bothering them. Not all of us are taking advantage of the system," wrote one woman. "We have no support group to talk to. We're dealing with different issues. It's tough on young kids because they see everyone else's dad playing baseball, and they don't understand."

The man known as "the soldier's soldier," outgoing Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier, acknowledges there is room for improvement.

"There's always more that can be done, (although) you don't always want to look to a public program for those kind of things," he said during a recent visit to Calgary.

"We are up front in the things we have to do when someone takes a bullet or an explosion or a piece of shrapnel or is seriously injured on operations for us. Whether it's in Afghanistan or elsewhere, we're going to make sure that individual and his or her family is well supported and we've really just started to get the basis of how we do that laid out."

The study recommends compensation and benefits flow directly to caregivers, that the focus be on the family's needs as well as those of the veteran and that the department help with caregiving so a spouse can work outside the home.

"What some of them need is ongoing care at home, so they ... could be in the labour force. (A soldier) may need somebody with him or somebody monitoring him during a good bit of the day," said Keating.

The alternative is family members stressing over whether they should stay home to provide care or try to work to bring in income.

And while Veterans Affairs has traditionally dealt with frail and aging veterans, the reality is that more and more cases involve younger soldiers, said Keating.

"It's really long term. We're not talking about broken bones and things like that which heal. These are long-term and chronic."

Veterans Affairs says it is already acting on the report.

"We are contacting all Canadian Forces veterans who are seriously disabled, and their families, to ensure they have all the supports possible from Veteran Affairs Canada and other sources," said spokeswoman Heather MacDonald.

"Our department is increasingly aware of the impact of veterans' injuries on caregivers and we have ... many initiatives to help meet the changing needs of our younger veterans and their families."

-With files from James Stevenson