



Responding to Veterans' Homelessness in Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities

**Alberta Service Provider Engagement,
What We Heard Report**

2026



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| **Canada**

About the Project

The Rural Development Network is leading a national research and engagement project, funded by Veterans Affairs Canada, to better understand the housing experiences of Veterans from the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) who live in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. By connecting with Veterans and service providers, the Responding to Veterans' Homelessness in Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities project is hoping to learn more about:

- How Veterans end up facing housing instability or homelessness;
- What makes rural housing challenges different;
- Where services are working well; and
- Where gaps, funding pressures, or coordination challenges exist.

Contact info@ruraldevelopment.ca for more information on the Responding to Veterans' Homelessness in Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities project

Acknowledgements

RDN's physical office is located on the Traditional Territories of Treaty 6 and is home to many First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Peoples. As a national organization, we acknowledge that RDN staff and the communities we support live, gather, and organize across Turtle Island.

Inuit, Métis, and First Nations Peoples are experiencing houselessness at disproportionately high rates compared to non-Indigenous people in Canada. Unlike the common, colonialist definition of houselessness, Indigenous houselessness is not simply defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully understood as a loss or breakdown of relationships between individuals, families, and/or communities and their land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities. RDN recognizes the ways in which settler relationships to both the land and the Peoples of this land have been broken and misused, causing and contributing to Indigenous houselessness. We also recognize the ways in which our presence on this land upholds colonialism and reproduces dispossession and violence for Indigenous Peoples, further perpetuating experiences of Indigenous houselessness.

In an ongoing effort to support Indigenous communities in addressing issues of housing, houselessness, and service needs, we are committed to decolonizing houselessness research and advocating to funders for Indigenous self-determination in the housing and social sectors.

We share this acknowledgement to reaffirm our responsibility and commitment to reconciliation. We also recognize that this land acknowledgement is just that—an acknowledgement; it is but one step in our journey. We commit to upholding the conditions of the treaties that govern this land.

We thank you!

We want to extend a very sincere thank you to those who participated in the first engagement session for the *Responding to Veteran Homelessness in Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Communities* project. Since this was the first of several engagement sessions that will be taking place across Canada, the discussions and experiences shared helped create the foundation for upcoming sessions and inform activities that follow.

pieterdevos
consulting

We would also like to thank Pieter de Vos of **Pieter de Vos Consulting** for his support with the co-design, facilitation and reflective learning for this session. Pieter will continue supporting the team through the remaining engagement sessions, helping us learn and build upon each session as we continue.



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Clarification of Terminology

Service Providers

It is important to note that when the term “service providers” is being referenced throughout this report, we are referring to:

- Homelessness sector organizations
- Veteran-serving (CAF and RCMP) organizations
- Health care providers
- Community-based agencies
- Indigenous service providers
- Municipal or regional staff

Veterans

For this project, a Veteran is defined as any individual who has served in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) or as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP),¹ regardless of their length of service, role, or reason for discharge. This definition recognizes that service experiences and related challenges may impact individuals in diverse ways, including those who did not receive an honourable discharge, acknowledging systemic factors that may lead to non-honourable discharges, including discrimination, trauma, or unmet mental health needs.

Where it’s vital to understanding the specific experiences and perspectives, acknowledgement between CAF and RCMP Veterans throughout the research and engagement of this project will be disaggregated.

¹ Although not defined as Veterans in the legislation of Veterans Affairs Canada, the RCMP has partnered with Veterans Affairs Canada for more than 60 years to help retired, regular and civilian members and their families ([Senate of Canada, Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs, 2024](#)).

Purpose of the Engagement Session

Homelessness and housing insecurity in rural and remote areas often present differently than in urban areas; however, policies and funding decisions don't always reflect that. With this in mind, the Responding to Veterans Homelessness project is bringing together service providers in the homelessness and Veteran-serving sectors, especially those serving rural, remote, and Indigenous communities, for small, focused, in-person working sessions where honest conversation and shared learning can take place in hopes to (a) better understand the pathways to housing insecurity and homelessness among Veterans and (b) find practical ways forward for stronger advocacy and collaboration in supporting Veterans. These sessions are intended to shape project findings, future advocacy, and to support the project's survey reach through a call to action.

Alberta-based Engagement Session

The first engagement session took place on May 27, 2026, with engagement focused on Alberta-based service providers in the homelessness and Veteran-serving sectors, especially those serving rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. It should be noted that only one person was representing the RCMP in the group and therefore there may be a limited lens around RCMP-specific processes and concerns.

Acknowledging that this was the first time the project team facilitated this session, the team was learning in the moment the most effective ways to support meaningful conversations rooted in the experiences and perspectives of service providers. Lessons learned were debriefed and documented to further inform sessions taking place in Nova Scotia and Ontario in the fall of 2026.



Pre-Engagement Survey

Pre-Engagement Survey

Leading up to the engagement session, attendees were invited to complete a short survey to help anchor conversations to explore throughout the day. The questions were pulled directly from the project's Service Provider Survey, which will be circulated more broadly across Canada as a part of the project's data collection process. The pre-engagement survey also provided participants with a snapshot of the larger survey. Following each engagement session, participants will be encouraged to share the full Service Provider Survey within their organizations and networks to support the ongoing data collection of service provider insights.

Eight of the 11 participants completed the pre-engagement survey, and they could select more than one response for each question, so percentages may add up to more than 100%. Considering the number of respondents was quite small, these findings are intended to provide context for the engagement session rather than represent experiences of service providers as a whole.

Key findings from the pre-engagement survey

Topic	Common responses
Challenges transitioning to civilian life	Navigating VAC/benefits and paperwork (100%); loss of structure, purpose, or identity (100%); mental health or trauma-related challenges (100%); family or relationship strain (100%); life skills (87.5%)
Housing challenges/barriers	Poor credit or rental history (87.5%); lack of affordable housing (75%); lack of adequate housing (75%); distance from services (75%); limited rental stock (62.5%); accessibility needs (62.5%); lack of Veteran-specific housing supports (62.5%)
Effective approaches in supporting Veterans in rural, remote, or Indigenous communities	Partnerships with local organizations (62.5%); virtual services (50%); mobile outreach, peer support, community navigators, Indigenous-led approaches, relationship-building, and bringing services into communities (25% each)
Impact of living in rural or remote communities	Long travel distances (87.5%); transportation challenges (87.5%); limited local support services (87.5%); centralization of services in urban areas (87.5%); limited basic-needs services (75%); limited emergency/shelter options (75%)



Group Discussion Activity

Group Discussion Activity

Time was spent in the morning getting to know each other. Eleven people attended the morning part of the session, and nine people remained throughout the afternoon session. All attendees brought expertise and perspectives from organizations rooted in Veteran advocacy, housing and homelessness, transition support, recovery services, and community-based Veteran programming.

The afternoon was focused on breakout group activities designed to focus on themes identified from the pre-engagement survey. Those themes were as follows:

- Challenges in transitioning out of service
- Housing-related barriers
- Rural accessibility

We adapted the activity from the Water of Systems Change² action learning exercise to guide discussions, with a specific focus on “Part 1” of the exercise, which is designed to perform “... an external assessment of opportunities to make progress on the social or environmental issue” (p. 3). The following question was used to support conversations in the breakout groups:

What existing factors are keeping things the way they are and making it harder to move forward?

Group 1: Challenges in transitioning out of service

What existing factors are keeping things the way they are and making it harder to move forward?

This discussion highlighted policy-related factors that create challenges in transitioning out of service, one being policies related to delivering to P.O. Boxes in rural areas. The notes taken on this topic were not detailed enough to determine whether participants were referring to Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) policies or to third-party providers, such as Canada Post or other courier services like Purolator or FedEx. Upon further exploration following the engagement session, the project team discovered that both Purolator and FedEx do not deliver to PO Boxes, which can pose challenges for Veterans in rural areas in receiving documents and supplies. Concerns were also raised about the expectations placed upon CAF members leading up to release and the limitations in allowing retiring members to access programming before leaving. The group also noted the need for a clear definition of homelessness among those working in the space.

² Kania, J., Garfunkel, D., & Price, H. (2018, July 13). The Water of Systems Change: Action Learning Exercise. FSG.: <https://www.fsg.org/resource/water-systems-change-action-learning-exercise/>.

A consistent theme in the discussion centred on the need for better communication throughout the transition process. Highlighted in that was the importance of communicating with Veterans' families during the transition phase and how vital it is for transitioning CAF members to be connected to an advocate before release. The discussion also brought attention to the disconnect in understanding the roles of Partners in Canadian Veterans Rehabilitation Services (PCVRS) (for families) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) case managers. The absence of a case manager can leave Veterans feeling abandoned by CAF, once again highlighting the need to identify an advocate before release and the value in having peer support through the transition.

Power dynamics were touched upon in this discussion, particularly regarding the chain of command. Also highlighted were concerns around junior members being afraid to speak up about their needs and an overall theme in how CAF members are not taught to advocate for themselves.

Group 2: Housing-related barriers

What existing factors are keeping things the way they are and making it harder to move forward?

Reflections in this discussion generally fell into two interconnected areas: the experiences of Veterans navigating housing and the experiences of service providers/organizations supporting them. Importantly, the discussion highlighted power dynamics between service providers and Veterans (both CAF and RCMP), adding the even more complex power dynamic between landlords and Veterans, and funders and service providers. This moved into how policies and laws can keep service providers and Veterans in a box, with additional reflection on how landlord screening processes can create barriers to accessing rentals. The group highlighted how VAC could be a good place to start in terms of support and advocacy when it comes to navigating landlord processes. Discussions also revealed the need for improvement in the transition/transfer of disability benefits, as providing proof of these benefits can be noted in the housing rental application process as stable income.

The conversation moved to the experiences of service providers and organizations as it relates to housing-related programming, and how it can be difficult to navigate through certain policies and understand what is required by funders. Funding limitations, especially in rural communities, can create challenges along with reporting structures. Connections and relationships among organizations can help, but only so much, and there can be a lot of red tape from a federal/provincial/municipal standpoint. In terms of resources, the discussion pointed to a lack of housing stock, thereby forcing Veterans to look

outside their community or surrounding area. Some participants expressed there can be tension in small communities, specifically around the division of responsibility and funding. Further to this, in terms of front-line support, intake processes can be rigid and internal policies do not always require follow-up support. Policies and practices may be well-intentioned but do not always translate effectively in practice.

Group 3: Rural accessibility

What existing factors are keeping things the way they are and making it harder to move forward?

Discussions in this group began with grant policy restrictions and “red tape”, and how that can hinder services in rural communities, with one person sharing a specific example related to food security. Policies related to food bank services may limit food donations to one per household per month, which may not be ideal for larger households. Further conversation highlighted a lack of coordination among organizations, both in the work and in advocating for funding needs. There are times when organizations might be competing for the same funding as well, and participants recognized this as an opportunity for organizations to lean into their existing relationships with each other to make certain programming possible and resources accessible.

Participants agreed there can be limited awareness among residents in smaller communities in how housing insecurity/homelessness presents itself, which can contribute to NIMBYism³. Further to this, highlighted was the power dynamic and relationship between town council and residents – town council may be resistant to change because of potential backlash from the community. The group emphasized the value of awareness education in addressing NIMBYism. Participants shared that conversations about housing in smaller communities can exclude certain voices, which may be linked to limited diversity in less populated rural and remote areas. Because of this, certain voices tend to be responsible for representing entire communities, which can lead to burnout and limitations in perspectives.

In terms of RCMP-specific concerns, the power dynamics surrounding federal budgets were highlighted. The federal government holds power in the budget allocation process, along with how the RCMP is funded for the supports it

³ NIMBYism (“Not in My Backyard”) refers to situations where there is resistance to housing or support services for those experiencing homelessness due to concerns of how they impact the community. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. (2025, May 13). Building community resilience to combat anti-homeless NIMBYism. Homeless Hub. <https://homelesshub.ca/blog/2025/building-community-resilience-to-combat-anti-homeless-nimbyism/>

provides. All of which can be limiting when tailoring services specifically for the RCMP. The dialogue in the group moved to direct impacts on Veterans in rural and remote areas when interacting with various support services. They noted concerns that some Veterans may feel that organizations providing housing and supports do not need to know their Veteran status. However, not disclosing their status can affect access to specific supports and being prioritized for housing programs.

The group also emphasized the importance of ongoing advocacy for the funding of NGOs and effective transportation systems.



Additional Conversations and Insights

Additional Conversations and Insights

Throughout the day, conversations were guided by a flexible agenda with areas focusing on accessible supports and resource gaps, systems and coordination, and understanding what would actually help, all within a rural and remote context. Themes emerged in the discussions, specifically around peer support for Veterans, access to resources, navigating systems, and limited awareness and knowledge in various areas among both service providers and Veterans.

Limited Awareness and Knowledge

Participants expressed concerns about there being a lack of knowledge among both Veterans and service providers regarding Veteran-serving systems, supports, and the transition to civilian life. One participant, who brought both lived experience as a Veteran and professional experience supporting other Veterans, highlighted that while CAF onboarding orientations provide a lot of information about supports and processes, it is likely many do not retain information about the service transition process. Therefore, Veterans may not be fully aware of what to consider leading up to release, such as reintegration supports and practical life skills needed to adapt to civilian life.

The concept of “learned helplessness” was also discussed as a way of understanding why some Veterans may struggle to advocate for themselves during the transition to civilian life. Shifting from the highly structured environment of the military to civilian systems, which can often be less coordinated and require self-advocacy, can be challenging for some. One attendee emphasized the need for greater awareness of how secondary conditions (e.g., erectile dysfunction) can stem from primary service-related injuries (e.g., PTSD). A lack of understanding of how these are connected can create barriers in accessing the appropriate supports. If symptoms (erectile dysfunction) are addressed in isolation, as opposed to being associated with an underlying condition (PTSD), Veterans may miss opportunities to access mental health supports, disability benefits, or other supports.

Participants also noted that some service providers outside of the Veteran-serving space may have limited awareness of the impacts of military culture and Veteran-serving systems and supports. They identified that service providers could benefit from more learning opportunities and awareness of military culture and its ongoing influence on Veterans as they transition to civilian life.

Acknowledging and Professionalizing Peer Support

Throughout the engagement session, the importance of peer support was emphasized as a valuable component in supporting the transition to civilian life. Peer support can also play a valuable role in the advocacy for pre-release supports. The discussion highlighted that there are not enough advocates for Veterans who are also knowledgeable in the Veteran space, and vice versa. Despite its inherent value in transition, participants identified the need to professionalize peer support further, expressing the view that it's not consistently recognized within Veterans Affairs Canada's broader system of services.

Support Services and Housing Accessibility in Rural/Remote Communities

Participants agreed that living in rural and remote areas creates specific barriers in accessing housing and support services. Conversations brought forward several themes that may influence Veterans' experiences navigating supports and accessing housing.

Housing and Infrastructure

Limited housing supply, housing pressures during military posting seasons, and hidden or unsafe housing were noted as barriers to accessing housing. Also discussed were structural barriers such as zoning and land-use bylaws, all of which can further impact accessibility to housing. Housing initiatives in rural communities like housing pods (Drayton Valley) were highlighted as a way to address housing needs, along with continued investments in rural housing and supportive services. Outside of housing, transportation barriers, limited access to reliable internet, restricted access to essential services (including health care and ID services), and long travel distances were highlighted as challenges to accessing basic needs and supports.

Accessing Support Services

Several challenges came up in discussions around Veterans accessing supports in rural and remote communities. In general, a consistent issue in smaller communities is the limited availability of mental health supports such as therapists. Further to this, participants shared that Veterans may encounter barriers to finding health care providers knowledgeable in VAC processes and understanding those processes could support access to benefits and other

services. Discussions also surfaced about how valuable it is to use alternative methods in accessing supports, such as virtual intake processes; however, unreliable internet could present challenges for some. A couple of participants also noted that there are older Veterans who may not use certain forms of technology (e.g., email) and consideration should be given to other methods of communication. Conversations about forms of supports surfaced that certain gift cards may not always be appropriate in rural and remote communities, especially when certain stores are farther away and difficult to access without reliable transportation. Therefore, it is important to consider local options when using gift cards to provide support.

Navigating Services/Systems

Systems navigation and coordinated access of services came up often throughout the day. Participants shared that navigating support services can be overwhelming because there can be inconsistent information and limited coordination between organizations. A need for stronger communication and collaboration between the national, provincial, and local organizations in rural communities was emphasized. A real-time example came to light during the session when representatives from a recovery and homelessness-serving organization were unaware of some of the Veteran-serving supports in the room, which highlighted how a disconnected system can act as a barrier to Veterans receiving appropriate referrals and care.

RCMP-Specific Transition

The RCMP Veterans' experience in transitioning out of service differs in terms of access to supports and the challenges they face. Discussions surfaced that, unlike CAF, the RCMP does not have an equivalent of centralized CAF-style transition centres for members leaving the service. However, former members of the RCMP can access various supports similar to CAF, such as health, disability and VAC-related supports. A participant shared that there may be limited interaction with VAC and RCMP members while waiting on decisions related to benefits. The discussion raised a larger question about how Veteran-serving organizations reach and connect with former RCMP members, especially after they have left the structure and relationships associated with service. A larger take-away from this session was how important it will be to host engagements specifically related to the RCMP Veteran experience.

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Continuing the Conversation

Continuing the Conversation

Call to Action

Everything shared throughout this engagement session represents a part of the project's ongoing work to better understand the pathways to Veterans experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness in rural and remote communities across Canada. We encourage service providers to share the project's Service Provider Survey and the Veteran/Lived Experience Survey within their networks. Service providers may include:

- Social and community support services
- Housing and homelessness services
- Food banks and basic-needs services
- Veteran-serving organizations
- Indigenous organizations and service providers
- Health care providers
- Employment and training services
- Family violence-prevention services
- Addiction and recovery services
- Faith-based organizations
- Financial and income supports

Areas for Further Exploration

This engagement session highlighted the need to further explore how to better support rural and remote service providers that may encounter Veterans but do not have a mandate to serve Veterans. As the project moves into the resource development phase, there is an opportunity to explore ways to help these organizations navigate the Veteran-serving systems and identify appropriate supports in a way that moves beyond navigating formal directories of service and more toward “warm” connections between organizations.



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