

# Working Together in Montréal to Improve Veterans' Well-Being: A Canadian Perspective

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## Abstract

Services for veterans in Canada can be unclear and difficult to navigate for civilian service providers working with veterans. In this article, we feature two Montréal-based initiatives that aim to improve services for veterans through collaboration, the Old Brewery Mission and Respect Forum. We begin by providing background information about Canada's recent history of military engagements and veterans affairs issues. The first example of collaboration presented is the *Sentinelles de la rue* (Sentinels of the Street) program, led by the Old Brewery Mission. The Mission works with Montréal's homeless men and women, meeting their essential needs while finding practical and sustainable solutions to end chronic homelessness. The Mission is now developing a collaborative model in partnership with government departments, veterans peer support organizations, and local health and social services to house and support homeless military veterans. The second example is Respect Forum, a not-for-profit initiative that has been organizing networking events in Montréal, Québec since 2016. The aim of these events is to promote military–civilian and multisectoral collaboration to improve services for veterans. Respect Forum meetings

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have made it possible to begin bringing together and mapping out local and national service providers working with veterans.

**Keywords**

veterans, homelessness, well-being, services, collaboration, Canada

This article was written by authors who hail from different professional backgrounds in Canada—academia, homeless services, and business. We also possess different levels of experience with military culture and different levels of fluency communicating in English and French. What we have in common is that we are all animated by a shared desire to facilitate interinstitutional collaborations to improve services for veterans. We begin the article by providing background information about Canada’s recent history of military engagements and veterans affairs issues—while noting the fact that Canada does not have a veterans affairs hospital system. Having set the stage, we then feature two examples of collaborative approaches to improving services for veterans—an organization that offers shelter services to veterans (Old Brewery Mission [OBM]), and a networking initiative that brings together a wide range of military and civilian organizations to promote collaboration in service delivery (Respect Forum). We conclude by reflecting on the importance of time, dialogue, and the building of trust in the formation of collaborative relationships that improve services for veterans.

**A Troubled New Era**

Beginning with the Gulf War (1990), Canada entered “a troubled new era of difficult military operations and an accelerated tempo of deployments in many of the world’s most complex environments, including Rwanda, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Haiti, and Libya” (Rose, Aiken, McColl, & Carew, 2013, p. 153)—a time marked by simultaneous cuts in military personnel and a downturn in recruitment (Ray & Forchuk, 2011). Afghanistan was one of Canada’s largest military operations since World War II, with more than 40,000 members of the Canadian Forces involved (Veterans Affairs Canada [VAC], 2017). Some 40,000 Canadian military personnel have also served in the Balkan region (since 1992), under difficult conditions and on peace support missions (National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, 2018). In terms of the overall size of the Canadian Forces, in 2017, “there were 66,472 Regular Force personnel with 99,716 additional family dependents (spouses, children and other dependents). In the Reserve Force, there

were 47,135 personnel with 38,398 additional family members and dependents” (Manser, 2018, p. i).

The transformative nature of Canada’s intensified operational tempo since the 1990s is described in the following extracts from a 2013 special report for the Minister of National Defence:

- The Canadian Forces has been engaged in almost continuous operations since 1990—more than 20 major operational missions the world over (most of which required multiple “troop” rotations).
- Within a single professional generation, Canadian sailors, soldiers, and air force personnel have adapted to increasingly more complex and challenging conflict environments, seamlessly morphing from peacekeepers and peacemakers to warriors.
- This transition required much of Canadian Forces members. Considerably more was also asked of their families. The current (relative) respite in operations tempo provides a unique opportunity to take stock of how military families are faring (Daigle, 2013, p. 1).

Ironically, VAC staffing was heavily cut just prior to Daigle’s concerning report. According to the 2012 technical report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), VAC “was the department third hardest hit by federal staffing cuts. . . . From 2011-12 to the current 2014-15 budget year, the Veterans Affairs staff complement has been cut by 24% with an additional 1% cut planned by 2016-17” (Macdonald & Hatt, 2014, p. 6). The subsequent closing of nine service centers made news headlines in cities across the country. These centers, says the CCPA report, had “helped veterans access complicated federal programs specifically for veterans as well as serving a case management role” (Macdonald & Hatt, 2014, p. 6).

### *Veteran Homelessness and Other Issues*

Point-in-time homeless counts in cities across Canada have called attention to the presence of a distinctive cohort of military veterans in homeless populations. In Montréal, 6% of the homeless population was estimated to be composed of military veterans in 2015 (Latimer, McGregor, Méthot, & Smith, 2015, p. 7). These homeless counts have been accompanied by a recent spike in Canadian policy-facing homelessness literature (Bourque et al., 2015; Forchuk, 2016; Forchuk, Richardson, & Atyeo, 2016; Goering et al., 2014; Kerr, 2016; Segaeert & Bauer, 2015). Other signs of trouble in veterans affairs have included a 2014 class action lawsuit against the Government of Canada’s claw back of veterans benefits, a 2016 class action

lawsuit pertaining to military sexual trauma, reports about convoluted and slow service delivery by VAC (e.g., Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014), and research attesting to our limited knowledge about veteran homelessness (e.g., Ray & Forchuk, 2011). And last, according to academic scholarship, reintegrating into civilian life can be one of the most stressful periods in the lives of military personnel and veterans, affecting functioning, community engagement, and well-being in the long-term (English & Dale-McGrath, 2013; Hopman et al., 2015; Morton & Wright, 1987; Shields et al., 2016).

### ***Policy-Facing Veterans Well-Being Research***

Veteran homelessness and other well-being issues are now being studied by policy-facing research on several fronts. In 2001, VAC established the Scientific Authority and Research Directorate. This was followed by the founding of the Canadian Institute of Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) in 2010. Research and scholarly publications stemming from these initiatives includes a series of *life after service studies* (e.g., Van Til et al., 2017), a technical report on veteran well-being constructs (Thompson, MacLean, Banman, Mabior, & Pedlar, 2016), a new scholarly journal put out by CIMVHR (*Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*), and a review of Canadian Armed Forces mental health population studies (Thompson, Van Til, et al., 2016). In *Mental Health and Well-Being of Military Veterans During Military to Civilian Transition*, a document prepared for CIMVHR and VAC, the authors present a review of the literature on soldiers' experiences transitioning from military to civilian life (Shields et al., 2016).

### ***Veterans Affairs Canada***

There are an estimated 649,300 veterans in Canada (VAC, 2018a), with some 5,000+ soldiers released from service annually—approximately one quarter for medical reasons (Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs, Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, 2014). As the government department mandated to support veterans, one of VAC's roles is that of promoting the remembrance of veterans who have served during times of peace and times of war. VAC is also mandated to support the well-being of veterans (VAC, 2018b), which it does through a patchwork of services, programs, and benefits (e.g., for injury or illness, transitioning to civilian life, and health and well-being). In the absence of a veterans affairs hospital system, veterans may be eligible for residential-care support or long-term care in designated places in Canada's publicly funded hospitals. Military Family Resource

Centres, located on Canadian Armed Forces bases and wings, provide support for military families and community development as well as a program to assist veterans and their families to transition from military to civilian life (Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, 2018a).

Focusing on mental health, the Government of Canada also supports a network of operational stress injury (OSI) clinics, and a national peer support network called Operational Stress Injury and Social Support (OSISS). An OSI is defined by VAC (2018e) as

any persistent psychological difficulty resulting from operational duties performed while serving in the Canadian Armed Forces or as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It is used to describe a broad range of problems which include diagnosed psychiatric conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as other conditions that may be less severe, but still interfere with daily functioning.

OSI clinics are staffed by psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, mental health nurses, and other specialized clinicians (VAC, 2018c). The OSISS network provides mental health and family supports for “Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans and their families experiencing an operational stress injury” (Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, 2018b).

In a recent inaugural initiative, VAC funded 21 projects under its Veteran and Family Well-Being Fund. *Les Sentinelles de la rue* and Respect Forum are two such funded projects (VAC, 2018d).

### **Old Brewery Mission: *Les Sentinelles de la rue***

Located in Montréal and founded in 1889, the OBM is the second largest organization providing services to homeless men in Québec and the largest organization serving homeless women in the country. The Mission responds to the basic needs of more than 4,000 people a year while endeavoring to find concrete and sustainable solutions to end chronic homelessness. The seven distinct housing pavilions of the Mission offer a range of services such as emergency shelter, transition programs, health care and mental health care services, access to affordable housing, and more.

Working with the families of homeless people whenever possible, the Mission focuses on giving homeless people the tools to take control of their lives and take their rightful place in the community. To this end, the Mission has created a unique model for developing its programs based on three core principles: housing stability, urban health, and research. Urban health

involves an added element of physical and mental health resources offered directly through the Mission in partnership with leading health care providers; these resources offer homeless individuals the ability to address their health challenges while trying to attain residential stability. The urban health program is conducted in partnership with the *Centre Hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal* and the *Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux (CIUSSS) du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal*. Ongoing research projects are conducted with the Centre for Research on Children and Families at McGill University, and the Mission maintains a dedicated research coordinator on staff. The importance of actionable research to the Mission was articulated in a recent publication coauthored by two staff members of the Mission: *Building research capacity to improve services for the homeless: An integrated community-academic partnership model* (Duchesne, Rothwell, Ohana, & Grenier, 2016).

### Les Sentinelles de la rue (*Sentinels of the Street*)

*Les Sentinelles de la rue* began as a transitional housing pilot project for homeless veterans in May 2017. Supported by funding from the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy (Innovative Solutions to Homelessness funding envelope), this project aimed to offer veterans psychosocial support while helping them work toward residential stability. As of August 2018, the program had moved 15 veterans into transitional housing, including 11 former Canadian Armed Forces personnel and four veterans from other countries.

The impetus for *Les Sentinelles de la rue* began in 2016 when Matthew Pearce, CEO of the OBM, read about veterans in the State of Homelessness in Canada report (Gaetz, DeJ, Richter, & Redman, 2016). According to this report, shelter statistics indicated that 2.2% (2,950) of the homeless population had self-reported as veterans (Gaetz et al., 2016). These numbers, of course, do not include at-risk veterans (e.g., those who are "couch surfing") and those who do not access shelter services (e.g., living on the street). Nonetheless, the data available pointed to the existence of veterans as a distinctive subpopulation within the homeless population, one which was not recognized either in the City of Montréal's or the Government of Québec's strategic plans to combat homelessness. This realization set in motion a search for information about veteran homelessness, the availability of specialized psychosocial supports, and potential collaborators. The purpose of this search was to identify resources available for veterans, as well as resources needed for the Mission to provide psychosocial support and to work with veterans to attain housing stability.

Unfamiliar with military culture or veterans affairs, the Mission's efforts included reaching out to military and veterans peer support organization to better understand military culture and to learn about available supports. The Mission is a civilian organization accustomed to challenging hierarchies as it focuses on fostering compassion in its work with homeless people and being flexible in its approaches to people's capacities and needs. Engaging with the rigid structure of military organizations was therefore an eye-opening experience. In light of this difference, the Mission took the time to foster mutual understandings and symbiotic trust with potential collaborators.

Concretely, the merging of military support organizations and the OBM took form first as a collective acknowledgment that specialized programs were necessary for homeless veterans, furthermore as an initiative that could not happen without the support of one another. Subsequent to this acknowledgment began extensive networking in an effort to both recruit participants and establish the veteran-specific services that would be necessary beyond those typically offered to homeless individuals.

Within this initial development process, the OBM was confronted with the differing structures of military-based and civilian organizations. The realities of these converging structures can be illustrated in the personal experiences of many homeless veterans: accessing military services involves engaging with a strict bureaucracy of services that demands that paperwork be completed thoroughly and often autonomously; and accessing homelessness services involves a gradual admission of information and the accompaniment of staff through bureaucratic procedures. In short, homeless veterans must engage with the rigidity of military services alongside the more hand-holding processes of homelessness services; these resources needed to come together for a single access point to address the individual's needs both as a homeless person and as a veteran.

The trust that needed to be developed between organizations was mutual assurance that the other was operating under the collective vision that homeless veterans needed consolidated and accelerated services. Additionally, the OBM would learn in the design and implementation of a veteran-specific program that certain resources would be necessary from partners (e.g., rapid veteran status confirmation). The challenges in establishing trust came in several forms: military organizations were at times unwilling to accelerate or adapt their processes to meet the urgency of homelessness; others were unfamiliar with the often complicated psychosocial realities that accompany homelessness; and the OBM needed to adapt to the formalities and culture that frame relations within the military. Trust was established by learning the limitations and strengths of one another: military organizations recognized the expertise of the OBM in helping individuals exit homelessness; the OBM

learned to engage with military culture and work with the unique strengths of each organization. One example of this symbiosis, as we will discuss, was the partnership with VETS Canada (Veterans Emergency Transition Services Canada): VETS Canada was able to entrust OBM staff to respond to the needs of homeless veterans, while the OBM was able to count on VETS Canada for the timely verification of veteran status for participants.

## Partners

While it may be said that “it takes a village” to provide services to homeless populations, the scope of this article allows us to discuss just a few of the organizations involved in *Les Sentinelles de la rue*. We can break down the extensive network of partnering organizations into four categories: financial, military, housing, and community organizations. These categories are not mutually exclusive, particularly in the case of military organizations.

**Financial.** Perhaps the most pressing question in establishing veteran-specific programming was financial support and the need for dedicated funding as opposed to piecemeal funding, or “soft money.” This is underscored by the observation made by one Mission staff member who describes working with homeless populations to attain housing stability “as a marathon, not a sprint.” Given that *Les Sentinelles de la rue* was initially funded as a federally supported 1-year pilot project, the Mission was required to contend with the challenge of developing and implementing a program in a short time span. The funding provided through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy was primarily for staffing, designing the program, and the housing subsidies allocated to the participants. In Winter/Spring 2018, there were negotiations to amend this funding. The amendment was successful for the OBM and allowed them to continue the program by increasing the duration of the program until March 31, 2019.

**Military.** Several military and veterans affairs organizations have provided critical support. The *Fondation Québécoise des Vétérans* has provided funding for *Les Sentinelles de la rue* beyond the initial 1-year timeline. This contribution was crucial to the success of the program since it removed the uncertainty of whether rent subsidies would be covered beyond the 1-year timeline of the project. VETS Canada, as per its mandate to help move veterans into stable housing, has also provided support critical to the success of the program. It is essential to have the ability to verify a person’s status as a veteran to confirm his or her eligibility for the program, and VETS Canada rapidly and reliably confirmed the status of participants.



*Housing.* One major milestone for the *Sentinelles* occurred when the *Office Municipal d'Habitation de Montréal* established a housing subsidy program for *Les Sentinelles de la rue*. Another occurred when several housing groups, including property management companies, committed to providing apartment units for program participants. Additional housing support came in the form of businesses willing to furnish units for veterans. While finding units was an important aspect of placing individuals, furnishing the units was an equally important component of establishing residential stability for these individuals.

*Community Organizations.* Working with other community organizations to identify and offer veterans housing and psychosocial supports is another important component of developing a coordinated, collaborative approach to ending veteran homelessness. These organizations ranged from other shelter networks to day centers, harm-reduction centers, and community healthcare providers. Such organizations provided valuable resources to *Sentinelles* participants once they had begun the program.

## Challenges

*Distinctiveness of Veterans' Needs.* The generalized lack of understanding about military culture and the implications of having served is one of the greatest challenges faced in working with homeless veterans. As the OBM has learned, homeless veterans represent a marginalized group within homeless populations, which are an already marginalized group. Coming to this understanding and challenging the general lack of knowledge has meant starting from scratch to develop the know-how to work with veterans. Additionally, it has been crucial to find partners with the types of tacit knowledge and expertise needed that could also commit to the interactive and collaborative form of service provision that this demographic requires. One major hurdle was finding and spending time with the organizations and individuals who could impart this knowledge and commitment. Civilian organizations that provide services to homeless veterans have historically done so without realizing these people were veterans or, if they were aware, they lacked the necessary expertise and network to provide services to veterans as a distinct subpopulation.

The experience of the program has shown that, as with other subpopulations that are recognized within homeless communities, there are complex psychosocial issues that may be particular to this group. For example, homeless veterans are often struck with a comorbidity of conditions, most commonly PTSD, substance abuse and mental health issues (Gaetz et al., 2016).

While many veterans confront psychosocial issues in adapting to civilian life, homeless veterans have to deal with these issues in addition to elements specific to their homeless experience. One individual in the *Sentinelles* program, Mario, embodies this challenge perfectly: Mario ended his military service with anxiety, paranoia, depression, and extreme weakness; after being released from intensive psychiatric care, Mario had very little money and found himself completely isolated from his family and support network, which led him to becoming homeless. The combination of his veteran-specific psychological issues and his homelessness made him exceptionally fragile: when he entered the OBM, counsellors realized that Mario needed additional support as he was often too scared to be in close proximity to other shelter residents and he struggled to do basic tasks autonomously (OBM, 2017). Fortunately, Mario was able to enter the *Sentinelles* program and receive veteran-specific accompaniment. That being said, this step for Mario would have never been possible without the recognition of the specificity of the homeless veteran's experience and the collaboration that made it a reality.

Trying to reconnect veterans with their families is another important feature of the Mission's work. Throughout the trajectory of military service—from repeated disruptions to family life due to moving from base to base, stresses to family well-being due to operational stress injuries (e.g., mental illness), mission deployments, and then to release from service and homelessness—most of these individuals have exhausted or destroyed links to their families. Having access to research and mental health resources in this context has been crucial to efforts to reconnect veterans with their families. There were also challenges with recruitment. Some veterans did not want to participate in a program specifically for veterans, particularly one funded in part by the federal government and Veteran Affairs Canada. The reasons for this were varied: some were resentful of the government for the life they met after having served and wanted nothing to do with federal government programming; some were ashamed of having served in the military and did not want to be revealed as veterans through their participation in the program; some participants with PTSD were fearful of embarking in the program, as constantly discussing their experience as veterans was in its own way of reigniting their trauma; others simply did not want to identify as veterans as it could isolate them from a larger homeless community or arouse particular attention to them. In addition, several homeless individuals who came forward to participate in the program were not veterans and either believed they were (experiencing psychosis that convinced them as such) or were trying to access the program under false pretenses; these individuals were screened out of the program once their veteran status (verified with VETS Canada) came back negative.

*Financial Uncertainty.* The uncertainty surrounding funding was a more structural issue that came up in the recruitment of veterans for the program. Due to the initial assurance of only 1 year of government funding, participants could not be guaranteed subsidized housing for more than that term. This, in turn, led to hesitation on the part of participants to join the program. Those who participated did so as a leap of faith and had the most to lose from failure to secure additional funding beyond the 1-year time frame. As homeless individuals, many of whom had been homeless for many years before, *Sentinelles* participants were hyperaware of how precarious their residential stability was relative to this program: if the funding did not continue, many participants felt like they would return to homelessness at the end of the first year. Adapting to life in conventional housing was already a huge challenge for many participants: several struggled with significant isolation, mental health, and substance issues on entering housing; working through these issues and then losing their housing after a year posed a huge personal loss. As such, several potential participants were not willing to engage in the program. This leap of faith to embark on the program, despite knowing that it might be temporary, appears to be due to the success of those working in the program in gaining the trust of participants. Jacinthe Corbin, the Mission's executive social housing assistant, and Kasandra Szalipski, the *Sentinelles'* counselor, have noted that their ongoing relationships with participants were crucial in nurturing trust and in navigating the practical challenges of attaining residential stability. This trust was established through specialized psychosocial accompaniment. Much like the case of Mario, Kasandra and Jacinthe had to be attentive to the specific needs of the veterans in order for them to be able to adapt; sometimes being sensitive to elements as simple as ensuring that the participant had enough privacy and a sense of physical security (OBM, 2017). Recognizing that ongoing and specialized support was available provided the confidence necessary to embark on and stay within the program for the veterans. This relational stability was important whether the participant in question adapted quickly to the personal life changes brought about by transitional housing or acclimatized more slowly (OBM, 2017).

*Red Tape.* In seeking out partnerships, Mission staff quickly gained insight into the heavy bureaucracy faced by veterans in accessing services. It seemed that every step was accompanied by red tape, and nearly all services were delayed when most needed. As the Mission attempted to establish working relationships with several organizations that could confirm veteran status, most organizations proposed unrealistic time frames, sometimes up to a year. This issue was largely resolved on partnering with VETS Canada, the one organization that could confirm veteran status within 24 to 48 hours. VETS

Canada, as they specialize in emergency services for veterans, has developed resources and tools that emphasize immediate responses to issues. The partnership with VETS Canada was a major step forward as it allowed for entering veterans into the *Sentinelles* program in a timely fashion.

*Interorganizational Referrals.* Finding other homeless service organizations willing to refer veterans to the Mission was a further challenge. This reluctance on the part of organizations may have been based on the fear of losing funding or credibility. Without a core vision that includes meeting the needs of veterans or the support network critical to working with veterans, such organizations run the risk of underserving veterans.

### *Progress Indicators and Outcomes*

Despite the challenges mentioned, the Mission's *Sentinelles de la rue* program has successfully housed 15 participants and provided psychosocial support. Most important, the program has offered a group of homeless veterans an important first step toward housing stability, further establishing their social anchoring and repositioning them back toward their families and communities.

Another step forward occurred when the Mission held its November 2017 press conference announcing *Les Sentinelles de la rue*. This press event attracted more than 80 mentions in national media, bringing with it renewed visibility and interest in veterans homelessness.

The development of a toolkit for working with homeless veterans as a distinct group has been an additional outcome of *Les Sentinelles de la rue*. Going forward, the Mission looks forward to using this and other means to share its knowledge with other organizations seeking to develop programming for veterans.

## **Respect Forum: Networking for Collaboration Building**

Respect Forum meetings were started by Stephen Gregory, Honorary Colonel, 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, after he cofounded Respect Campaign—a civilian project to promote awareness of the needs of Canada's returning troops and veterans. In partnership with the Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, the Respect Campaign raised funds for the construction and installation of a monument on the Trans-Canada Highway in Kirkland, Québec. This monument “depicts a World War II veteran who has come home from war with his arm extended offering a victory/peace sign”

(Respect Canada, 2017). Widening his attention from remembrance to include well-being and action, Gregory launched Respect Forum meetings in Montréal to bring together stakeholders in the fight against PTSD and homelessness among Canadian troops and veterans.

### *Purpose of Respect Forum Meetings*

Launched in the fall of 2016, the aim of Respect Forum meetings is to provide an opportunity for a wide range of local organizations and volunteers from the military, health and social services, universities, community organizations, charities, NGOs, government agencies, and veteran peer support organizations to meet and learn about each other. Such a collaborative whole-of-society approach to improving services for veterans can be likened to a holistic strategy described in a joint report by the IBM Center for the Business of Government and a team of researchers from the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (Syracuse University). In this report, “engaging with state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private sector stakeholders supporting veterans at the community level” appears as the fourth of five building blocks for developing an enterprise approach to services for veterans (Huitink, Armstrong, Hidek, & Birnbaum, 2018, p. 7). Huitink et al’s (2018) five building blocks are as follows: (a) an appropriate interagency collaboration mechanism, (b) a comprehensive understanding of the challenges to delivering effective services and care, (c) a coordinated set of agency core competencies, (d) a robust engagement strategy with community-level stakeholders, and (e) the effective use of technology and data (p. 7).

### *Meeting Format*

Respect Forum meetings are usually 3 to 4 hours long and are by invitation only. They typically begin with opening remarks by the meeting facilitator, who welcomes new and returning participants, presents news about Respect Forum activities since the last meeting, and lays out the agenda for the day. This is followed by presentations from participants about their organizations and services for veterans, as well as scholarly presentations by researchers about veterans’ health and well-being issues. A short break with light refreshments then provides an opportunity for participants to connect with one another—and possibly begin a conversation that leads to collaboration. Next, participants gather in break-out sessions to discuss topics of interest (e.g., issues facing the veterans they work with, challenges to providing services, how to organize a veterans’ resource fair). At the end of the break-out session,

a member from each group summarizes their group's discussion to all. The meeting wrap-up is then given by the meeting facilitator, who provides a recap of the meeting and proposes next steps.

### *Motivation for Participation*

The landscape of services for veterans in Canada is complex and fractured, sometimes marked by competition between organizations for funding and a lack of awareness about relevant nearby organizations and their services. In fact, many Respect Forum participants have commented on how they were unaware of the existence of other organizations until meeting them at a Respect Forum meeting. These organizations typically have limited time and resources, focusing virtually all of their time and energy on the delivery of services—often abandoning plans for outreach activities out of necessity. Respect Forum meetings make it easy and efficient for organizations to discover one another. The types of collaboration that can arise from Respect Forum meetings include financial support, client referrals, training opportunities, board membership, coauthorship on articles, peer support, or other arrangements that fit the respective mandates, needs, and capacities of participating organizations. One Respect Forum participant involved in running a local rooming house (which included a cohort of veterans), for example, met another participant at a Respect Forum meeting who was working on a local project helping veterans with drug and alcohol addiction. These two groups are now working together to make addiction programming available to veterans in the rooming house.

### *Preliminary Impacts*

Sufficient momentum has built up in the Montréal area since 2016 to establish a critical mass of organizations that have been meeting and talking together for 2 years. One outcome has been the holding of an unprecedented gathering of service providers to showcase their organizations and services for veterans. Organized by the *Fondation Québécoise des Vétérans*, the event was held on September 29, 2018 on a military base in St-Hubert, Québec (near Montréal). A kind of resource fair for veterans, this event was attended by veterans and their families, organizations, and institutions working with veterans, as well as social workers and other professionals seeking information about veterans' well-being and related services. Another example of impact is the raising of awareness about veteran homelessness at the municipal level. This has been accomplished in Montréal by inviting municipal actors from homeless and day center services, and municipal representatives

whose portfolios include homelessness. Having taken root in Montréal, Respect Forum meetings are now being organized across Canada.

### *Expansion and Next Steps*

*Expansion.* In 2018, Respect Forum meetings were held in seven cities. With support from VAC, meetings were then expanded to 19 cities across Canada in March and April of 2019. To accomplish this, Respect Forum coordinators were recruited to organize local meetings, and a team of facilitators were trained to run these meetings. The meetings in 2019 were further expanded to include collaboration building for organizations that provide services to first responders, such as police, firefighters, and paramedics.

*Service Provider Directories.* As a result of holding Respect Forum meetings in 19 cities, Respect Forum has compiled contact information for inclusion in a service directory under development. The aim of this directory is to help Respect Forum participants find relevant services for their clients, as well as to connect with potential collaborators. The directory will be made available to participants via the Respect Forum website.

*Communication and Knowledge Development.* Two other aims of the Respect Forum initiative are to communicate Respect Forum news and collaboration stories to wider audiences, and to promote collaborative knowledge development between Respect Forum participants and academe. In terms of communication, four social media platforms have been created, namely a website and a Facebook page, and Twitter and Instagram accounts. To promote collaborative knowledge development, university researchers are invited to present their research on veteran health and well-being issues at Respect Forum meetings. Building on this, Respect Forum organizers also hope collaborative community engagement and research projects between Respect Forum participants and researchers will develop, including copresenting and copublishing new knowledge stemming from collaborative projects.

*Sustainability and Long-Term Planning.* With a view to long-term and national planning, Respect Forum is in the process of developing a national board that brings together representatives from major stakeholder organizations across Canada, including representation from the military, peer support organizations, mental health services, and academia. In terms of ensuring financial sustainability, Respect Forum is also in the process of developing a 5-year funding strategy with major stakeholders, in order for Respect Forum to continue to thrive long after the current support provided by VAC runs out.

## Closing Remarks

By collaborating on this article, we, as coauthors, have had to think and talk through the information and messaging we wanted to impart. In the process of doing so, we have identified three recurring themes, namely the importance of *time*, *communication*, and *trust* in improving services for veterans. Building a rapport with people can take time. This is true between homeless services providers and clientele, as well as between organizations that provide services to veterans. In the case of the OBM, trust was critical between Mission staff and clients in a variety of ways. Clients needed to know the promise of housing was close-at-hand and long-term. Some of this trust was made possible because of the Mission's partnerships with various organizations that provided financial support for housing, dedicated housing units, and the rapid verification of clients' status as veterans.

The Respect Forum's expansion, from a single-city initiative to a federally supported national initiative in 19 cities across Canada, grew out of 2 years of meetings in Montréal and the fact that participants kept returning and new participants kept joining. These meetings have begun to establish a sense of community across a diverse range of service providers seeking to improve services for veterans. Having set an example of how to run such networking events, these meetings have also shown the power of tapping into word-of-mouth testimonials within and across organizations and communities of interest, big and small, locally, and across Canada.

In the case of both the OBM's *Sentinelles* program and the Respect Forum networking initiative, there is recognition of the importance of learning from formal knowledge *and* from lived experience—especially when breaking new ground in service delivery. And last, we believe that documenting and communicating information and insights about processes and partnerships are integral to improving services for veterans. Such acts of documentation and conveyance help us further think through what we are doing and why—in conversation with one another. This, in turn, is important to forging a sustainable culture of knowledge sharing, collaboration building, and action—energized by a vision of a coherent national system of improved services for veterans.

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**Brenda Fewster**, a former Reservist in the Canadian Armed Forces, is a PhD candidate at Concordia University (Montréal, Québec) where she is conducting a project titled, *soldier2civilian* | *soldatÀcivil*: Motivation and Well-being of Canadian Military Veterans across the Life Course. *soldier2civilian* takes a multidisciplinary approach to investigate why military-to-civilian transitioning is

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**Hannah Brais** is the research coordinator at the Old Brewery Mission, a homelessness resource in Montreal, Quebec. Her work is centered on the experiences of homeless individuals navigating services in urban contexts, examining current systems in Montreal with a critical lens. More largely, she is interested in the condition of precarious populations, housing, financialization, and Canadian housing policies. Her methodol-

ogy practices generally focus on qualitative data, challenging and refining conventional evidence-based practices within both the community sector and policy analysis. She holds both an MSc of geography, urban, and environmental studies and a BA in urban planning from Concordia University.



**Stephen Gregory** is President of IsaiX Technologies Inc., a firm specializing in organizational development and technology for Fortune 500 companies. He is also Director of Acerus Pharmaceutical Corporation, which is traded on the Toronto Stock Exchange as ASP. He has cofounded a charity for the third Battery of Montreal Artillery, as well as a not-for-profit initiative called Respect Campaign which supports Canadian troops and veterans. He has assisted in raising over \$2.5 million for various causes, including families of Canadian troops, several community outreach projects, and large-scale commemorative

projects in Italy. In 2016, Gregory led the first Respect Forum in Montréal. Stephen Gregory was appointed Honorary Colonel of the second Field Regiment (Montréal) in 2016, and has been bestowed the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal, and commendations from the Minister of Veterans Affairs of Canada and the Commander of the Army. Gregory is a graduate of Carleton University, with an undergraduate degree in Law and Political Science. In 2013, Gregory completed the Rotman School of Management Directors Education Program (University of Toronto).



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