

Modernized Soldiers? Aid Commission to provide support for recent veterans

Written By BROCK WEIR

Modernizing Ontario's Soldiers' Aid Commission, established at the height of the First World War, will help ensure veterans of modern conflicts and their families, will be able to get the help they need, according to Todd Smith, the Province's Minister of Children, Community and Social Services.

Smith announced the Government's intention to overhaul the Commission at the Aurora Legion on Friday afternoon to mark Military Family Appreciation Day.

The Soldiers' Aid Commission was established in 1915 to support veterans coming home from the First World War. The Commission was subsequently expanded to support individuals who served in the Second World War and Korean Wars, but recent statistics have shown that of the 230,000 veterans now living in Ontario, approximately 93 per cent served after Korea.

Today, the Soldiers' Aid Commission supports veterans who are unable to pay for health-related items like wheelchairs, glasses, hearing aids, and even clothing and counselling. The Commission also helps families of veterans with costs and repairs related to making accessibility improvements around the home.

Should the Government's new legislation be passed, more than \$1.5 million will be available to help veterans of conflicts including and beyond the Second World War and Korea.

"Our Canadian Armed Forces are known for their teamwork and dedication, skills that are desired in all types of organizations and businesses," said Smith, who was joined on the steps of the Legion by area MPPs Christine Elliott and Michael Parsa, and members of both the Soldiers' Aid Commission and the Aurora-based Ontario Command of the Royal Canadian Legion. "Currently, the Ontario Soldiers' Aid Commission is the only Provincial agency that delivers supports directly to veterans and their families. We often say it, but it bears repeating, that we can never repay the thousands of service members who have made the ultimate sacrifice in order to protect our freedoms, be it in the First and Second World War, along with the Korean War. We must make sure we honour and protect them.

"We must modernize [the Commission]. We must look to the new generation of men and women as we plan for the next 105 years of the Soldiers' Aid Commission."

To underscore his point, Smith paid tribute to the 40,000 Canadian men and women who served in Afghanistan until 2014, along with a number of peacekeeping missions in Europe and Africa.

"Since its inception, the hard-working and dedicated men of the Commission have done their part in making sure that eligible service members receive the supports that they require, be it housing expenses, health costs, personal care, assistive devices and prosthetics," he continued. "For the last several years, our data has shown that the majority of these supports went to hearing aids, dentures, wheelchairs and housing accessibility items. However, it is a sad reality that with each passing year the number of living veterans who served in those 20th century wars is diminishing and that means the resources of the commission go unused while younger veterans are left without help from the Soldiers' Aid Commission."

Ontarians, he added, have "Always stepped up" to serve their country with the "same duty, passion and commitment" as the generations of veterans before them. It is now "imperative" that "we show them the same respect and support."

"We know the post-service adjustment can be very difficult for our veterans when they return home. We must not only honour their brave sacrifices; we must also be there for them when they return home. Many vets arrive back in their communities needing more supports. We know the unnerving statistics of veteran unemployment, homelessness, PTSD and heartbreakingly the suicide

epidemic. We can't allow our veterans to come home and not be able to afford the necessities they require to re-enter civilian life and that is why the Soldiers Aid Commission is so important and why our government is committed to providing them the supports that they need.?

Colin Rowe, Chair of the Soldiers' Aid Commission, was present for the announcement and called Friday ?a great day? for the organization.

?The needs that existed back in 1915 still exist today and we're glad that after years of lobbying by all our commissioners?we have a guarantee that the needs will be met for all our veterans wherever they have served, whenever they have served, in all the years to come. We want to thank the Province and the Minister for having made this bold move.?