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How Canadian vets struggle to transition from combat to civilian life



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WATCH ABOVE: Feds count on how many Canadian veterans living on streets. As Vassy Kapelos reports, the numbers were higher than expected.

Phillip Kitchen quickly found himself out of options when was discharged from the Canadian Forces after eight years, including a tour in Afghanistan, for smoking pot.

Kitchen did a seven month tour that included fighting in “Operation Medusa” – one of the deadliest Canadian-led offensive during the Afghan war. He was among the first responders after American aircraft mistakenly fired on Canadians in Sept. 2006, killing Pte. Anthony Graham.

When he returned to Canada in Feb. 2007 he says he immediately started showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. He used pot as a way to cope with the PTSD, but when he admitted to it he found himself discharged in 2008— “unfit for military service.” It wasn’t until three years later in 2011 that he got a medical release and “honourable discharge.”

“I was released with no benefits. I was mislabelled as addicted to marijuana,” said Kitchen. “It was a really tough time for me, to feel like I gave a lot to the military. It’s like losing eight years of your life.”

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He was given a \$10,000 cheque but it was quickly used up paying for his Ottawa apartment, where he lived with his wife Sonia and their son.

A year later, unable to work and still dealing with an untreated illness they moved Kingston.

“We lived out of a tent in a campground, just outside of Kingston, until October when they weren’t taking campers and then bounced around,” he said.

“There was really nothing I felt I could do. I was pushed out the door with no plan as to what I should do next.”

Veterans Affairs didn’t directly answer questions about Kitchen, but said the plight facing veterans “is unacceptable and one homeless person in Canada is one too many.”

But homelessness among Canada's veterans persists. A March 2015 study by Employment and Social Development Canada, published by *The Canadian Press*, estimates 2,250 former soldiers use shelters on a regular basis. Global News spoke with several advocacy groups and experts who believe the real number is much higher.

Only 60 emergency shelters were able to provide data on the number of clients who identified as veterans in 2014. The data also does not include the number of homeless vets who don't use shelters. It found the average age of a homeless veteran is 52, and that ex-soldiers cite alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental health issues as the main reasons they're seeking out shelters.

Michael Blais who heads a veteran's advocacy group says the numbers are very conservative and likely don't include Afghanistan veterans.

"I look at the age group, it's 52 years of age.... If a mental wound was incurred it was probably sustained in Rwanda, Somalia or the former Yugoslavia," said Blais.

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Kitchen said one of the most difficult transitions soldiers face is going from an active battlefield to civilian life.

"I love the military, the way it worked, the leadership, the opportunities. I was keen on my job," he said. "The transition to civilian life is so hard, I can't describe it. I had never been a civilian in adult life."

Veterans Affairs Minister Kent Hehr has promised to re-open nine veterans' services centres across the country that were closed by the former Conservative government.

"We are working in partnership with community organizations across the country to identify Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless," Minister Hehr said in a statement. "To ensure these Veterans receive the assistance, benefits and services they need, and to help them access community housing and support services.

Blais is calling for a "summit" to address the complex issues facing former soldiers.

"I would like the minister to call a summit. Get all these stakeholders and vested interests under one roof," he said. "It's vital that we have dialogue that results in effective protocols and mechanisms to help these people as soon as possible."

"Because we're going to have to bring in mental health experts, because we have to bring in addiction experts, because we have to reintegrate these people back into our society and restore the quality they had before entering the military. It's not going to be easy."

Kitchen, who loves being a stay-at-home dad to his three children Logan, Dillan and Emily, says he hopes the Liberals follow through on their plans to help Canadian vets.

“It’s promises right now,” he said. “In the army in we are taught, the mentality is, to hurry up and wait... I hope the overwhelming support that the Liberals got this election, [ensures] they make good on their promises.”

**With files from Monique Muise*