

A Victory for Veterans with ALS

The Honourable Jean-Pierre Blackburn, Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada, announced on Friday October 15, 2010, that veterans with ALS will now be eligible for increased benefits. Minister Blackburn made the announcement at a press conference, where he was joined by Pierre Poilievre, Member of Parliament for Nepean-Carleton, David Cameron, President and CEO of the ALS Society of Canada, and veteran Mike Watson, who has led a courageous, six-year battle against ALS.

“Having met veterans with ALS, I am deeply touched by what they have lived through,” said Blackburn. “These veterans and their families must concentrate all their energy on fighting this terrible disease rather than fighting to obtain the benefits and financial support they have earned.”

Veterans are now able to receive disability benefits, treatments and home care support – services that are greatly needed by veterans and their families who are affected by this devastating disease. For example, they will now be eligible for adapted wheelchairs, medical resources, housekeeping services and more.

The announcement follows months of advocacy initiated by ALS Canada. In July, Bobbi Greenberg, director of communications for ALS Canada and Nigel Van Loan, ALS Canada board member, met with The Royal Canadian Legion and the Veterans Affairs Ombudsman to discuss the inability of veterans with ALS to access benefits. On September 1, Greenberg and Van Loan, along with Diana Rasmussen, executive director and client services co-ordinator at the ALS Society of Manitoba, and Colleen O’Connell, MD, the research chief at the Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation, Fredericton, met with Veterans Affairs at their head office in Charlottetown to further discuss the issue.

The benefits come in large part thanks to the help of veteran Brian Dyck, who fought to get the Canadian government to increase benefits for all veterans with ALS. Dyck was diagnosed with ALS in the summer of 2009, after which he applied to VAC requesting support for him and his family. His case was initially denied.

On September 15 and 16, *Global National* aired a two-part series on veterans with ALS and the link between military service and the disease. The first segment featured an interview with Dyck and his family, upset at the need to spend his last moments fighting appeals. The second segment showcased the story of Mike Watson, another veteran living with ALS who had already received a pension from VAC – after numerous appeals over three years, which is often a lifetime for people with ALS.

Then, on September 17, Prime Minister Stephen Harper aired the following statement on *Global National*: “We're aware of some concerns on how veterans who have ALS may be handled and I've certainly been insisting our officials look into how we can fix some people's problems. So you're going to see some action on that in the not-too-distant future.”

After this segment was aired, Dyck and his family were quickly granted the benefits he deserved.

On October 5, ALS Canada representatives, including board members, advocacy committee members, researchers, volunteers and staff went to Parliament Hill in Ottawa to meet with a number of MPs and other government officials. This included staff from the Prime Minister’s Office and Prime Minister Harper, who took a photo with a number of ALS Canada representatives, including Watson. During the meetings representatives took the time to reiterate the need for official changes to benefits for veterans with ALS. On October 15, Minister Blackburn announced these changes at the press conference.

“We are extremely grateful to the Prime Minister of Canada and Minister Blackburn for their decision to provide Veterans with ALS the benefits and care they need. Veterans living with ALS now have one less hurdle to face on an already difficult road,” said David Cameron, president and CEO of ALS Canada. “Because of the progressive nature of the disease, some Veterans were dying before they had the chance to submit their case to VAC. We want to thank Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Honourable Jean-Pierre Blackburn for their quick and decisive action to support Veterans living with ALS.”

Sadly, Dyck had lost his battle with ALS just a few days before the announcement was made. Although he was unable to witness it firsthand, Dyck helped to fulfil a huge accomplishment for all Canadian veterans with ALS. While he is no longer with us, the legacy that he left will continue to live on.