

Women's Outreach Annual Plan 2023-2024

Updated 24 January 2024

Introduction

The Women's Outreach Annual Plan lays the foundation to continue working with partners and improving our understanding of the challenges Canadian women veterans and first responders face, to inform future initiatives. It is designed to advance the capacity for sharing information about services for women who wore a uniform and best practices, and create bridges between the support communities.

What it Means to Serve

For the remarkable men and women in uniform, whether military or a first responder, service means accepting the risks of performing hazardous duties or being placed in harm's way. Their duty is often physically and psychologically demanding, at times dangerous. They are prone to occupational injuries, including normal wear and tear from intense training and service, or from military operations and even combat for those who deployed. Many continue to have health issues when they complete their service and transition into a new career or retirement; the transition can be quite challenging. Some may feel aimless, lonely, and have difficulty finding new purpose. Negative mental health impacts, underemployment, turbulent or broken couple and family relationships, homelessness, and even suicide, can continue to affect these communities. The challenges are further amplified for people with intersecting lived experiences, including 2SLGBTQI+¹, Indigenous, black and racialized communities, and people with disabilities. Multiple overlapping factors that shape social, health and economic opportunities and outcomes must be considered in assisting these groups. Taking the time to listen and honour the lived experiences of people who may not see themselves reflected in traditional services is a big part of designing the right programs for veterans and former first responders. How well uniformed professionals and their families adapt, heal, and live their new lives once no longer in uniform is much dependent on having appropriate ongoing community support that help them transition and meet their unique needs.

The Bigger Respect Picture

Luckily, there are a multitude of organizations supporting veterans, former first responders and their families in Canada, making up a very rich ecosystem of support. That said, this can be overwhelming for any individual or organization to navigate. Overlapping services and confusion on the type of services offered can occur. This is

¹ 2SLGBTQI+ terminology and acronyms are continuously evolving. In 2016, the Government of Canada began using the term "LGBTQ2". More recently, the Government of Canada adopted in 2022 the use of 2SLGBTQI+ as a more inclusive term when it released its first Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan. 2SLGBTQI+ means Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and additional sexually and gender diverse people.

where Respect Forums comes in, creating a network of support organizations and building bridges between them, helping them find each other and clarifying roles, services, and accessibility, ultimately improving services to military veterans and former first responders.

Respect Forums includes portfolios for 1) Local Meetings, 2) Academic Outreach, 3) Indigenous Outreach, and 4) Women's Outreach. Through Women's Outreach, Respect Forums aims to recognize the specific challenges and needs of women who were in the uniformed professions².

Women's Outreach

Respect Forums recognizes that, in many respects, women's needs are different from those of men, hence the creation early on of a program focused on women. Even though women in uniform will experience very similar issues than the men who served, the physical and mental health impact, their response and coping mechanisms, and how they deal with issues can be different due to gender differences. If women were the subject of harmful conduct during their careers, it adds a layer of complexity to their needs. Programs are often designed for men and made accessible to women, but don't necessarily meet their specific needs, or may not give them the safe space they require to communicate openly. Women's Outreach seeks to help find organizations that are truly designed for women in uniform and provide a forum where they can connect.

To achieve this, the Women's Outreach Annual Plan consists of three (3) areas of activity, or Lines of Effort (LoEs): 1) Understand the environment; 2) Expand the support network; and 3) Conduct forums and collaborate on forums focused on women.

Lines of Effort (LoEs)

1 - Understand the environment

Gaining an understanding of the existing community services, the specific services they provide, how to access them, their outcomes, along with ongoing research initiatives, will help shape and guide initiatives directed at women in uniform. The goals for this Line of Effort are to:

- Review the literature regarding the support needs of women who wore the uniform and identify the common themes in regards to their needs
- Search the various organizations supporting women in uniform across Canada and identify potential gaps in support services
- Determine the needs for collaboration and learning within the support community

² To note that although veterans and first responders of the 2SLGBTQI+ groups are captured in the existing four portfolios, Respect is looking to expand programming to address their specific needs.

- Help identify potential research initiatives
- Bring a greater gender perspective to the overall Respect Forums and events taking place

2 - Expand the support network

Engaging community support services, experts, advocacy groups, and internal and external partners, will provide a better understanding and awareness of how they support and impact women who wore a uniform. Engaging this community will also foster greater sharing of strategies, successes and lessons in supporting these women in the community. Maintaining the RespectMap, an online database of support organizations across Canada, is key to helping organizations find each other to offer the best combination of services and resources. The goals for this Line of Effort are to:

- Engage contacts and establish new ones within all uniformed services
- Promote trust and collaboration through professional communications and follow-up
- Develop and grow strategic partnerships when opportunities present
- Recruit more organizations to the RespectMap

3 – Conduct forums and collaborate on forums focused on women

Conducting regular virtual or in-person forums, and collaborating on forums with partners is the main effort of Women's Outreach. Organizations are invited to present on the services they provide to women and discuss their specific needs. These knowledge-sharing events also help open dialogue on the challenges women experience and encourage collaboration to find solutions. It creates a place of awareness and sharing of experiences on various pertinent topics and challenges. The goals for this Line of Effort are to:

- Conduct regular virtual and in-person forums and collaborate on forums together with partners
- Improve online accessibility of Women's Outreach events by recording and/or uploading the presentations online, including supporting reports/research material

Women's Outreach Coordinator

Reporting to the Director National Programs, the Women's Outreach Coordinator (WOC) is responsible for implementing and updating the annual plan. Leading the program, the WOC engages with and connects supporting organizations, organizes

events, identifies opportunities for collaboration, reports on activities, and ensures the goals of the program support those of Respect Forums.

The WOC works closely with the Respect Forum Regional Coordinators and Local Meeting Facilitators to learn of networking opportunities and leverage their forums and community connections.

Conclusion

Connecting like-minded women and support organizations in a safe space through collaboration creates communities of understanding, support and encouragement for our incredible women veterans and former first responders across the country. Together with our partners, we will continue to build an even more robust safety net and help women face adversity, break down barriers, rise and move forward towards a new healthy and fulfilling life.