

Government Orders

tional pension benefits can be paid to a pensioner's spouse and dependent children. Survivor pensions are payable to the spouse of a deceased pensioner.

When we take all recipients into consideration we find that some 150,000 Canadians receive veterans pensions. The 1995 rates provide for a minimum of \$81.50 per month for single pensioners and \$101.88 for married pensioners. The maximum benefit paid per month is \$1,629.97 for single pensioners and \$2,037.46 for married pensioners.

Most of my colleagues on both sides of the House already have direct experience with the current pension process. In every province and territory we find veterans or other dependants who receive the benefits. In Ontario alone we find over 51,000 pension recipients. This is because Canadians from all provinces and territories served our country in the two world wars, Korea, and with the regular forces on peacekeeping missions. They served Canada well. Now it is time for Canada to pay its dues by making sure veterans receive the pensions they deserve.

• (1310)

Veterans do not deserve the delays they have encountered under the current system. Systems have to be updated. It is a sad state of affairs when a veteran has to wait 18 months or up to three years in some cases after the first application before he or she can receive a pension.

The people at Veterans Affairs Canada are doing their best to speed the applications through the system, but the people at the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, the Canadian Pension Commission and the Veterans Appeal Board are trying hard to clear away the backlog of applications, but it gets harder every day.

The whole system is overloaded right now. I understand that about 13,000 veterans are expected to apply for pensions this year. The administrators are doing what they can with the system that is now in place. It is high time we changed that system. The people who work in the current system want to see it changed. They know they could serve veterans more effectively if the process were streamlined. Veterans also want to see their cases settled more quickly.

I am sure there is hardly a member in the House who has not at one stage or another been asked by a constituent to help them out on a veteran's case.

The current process dates back to 1971. Individual parts of the administration of veterans pensions have been studied and changed since that time, but there has been no comprehensive reform of the entire process. The consequence of the piecemeal changes has been that an already complex process has become even more complicated and cumbersome. The measures before us will simplify the process from start to finish.

In 1992 Veterans Affairs Canada conducted a study that identified a number of ways to improve the pension process. One of the most important ways of improving it was to speed up the turnaround times. Many of the recommendations of that 1992 study have been implemented. However, to reduce turnaround times we now need the legislative changes included in Bill C-67.

The legislation before us provides legislative change directed to giving effect to three proposals. First, responsibility for decisions will be transferred to Veterans Affairs Canada for the Canadian Pension Commission. Second, the Bureau of Pensions Advocates will become part of Veterans Affairs Canada and will concentrate on preparing cases for appeal. Third, the Canadian Pension Commission and the Veterans Appeal Board will be merged to create the new veterans review and appeal board.

There will be no changes to benefits under the legislation. The two-tier appeal system will be maintained. Whereas the Canadian Pension Commission now decides on first applications and first appeals and the Veterans Appeal Board decides on final appeals, under the legislation before us the new veterans review and appeal board will be responsible for two levels of appeal.

It is important to make very clear that veterans are not losing their appeal rights under the legislation before us. The new board will speed up the turnaround time. It will address the current backlog of cases awaiting appeal, but it will not deny appeal rights to veterans who have been told by Veterans Affairs Canada that they are not eligible for pensions, or who are not satisfied with the amount the department has awarded them.

The new board will continue to report to Parliament and its members will continue to be governor in council appointees. The permanent membership of the combined board will eventually be reduced by eight, but only after the backlog has been eliminated. By unifying the Canadian Pension Commission and the Veterans Appeal Board into a single appeal body, the government is helping to pare down the system. This is part of the government-wide review of agencies and commissions led by the minister responsible for public service renewal. The objective is to simplify public sector structures and streamline their operations wherever possible, while improving service to the public.

• (1315)

That is why we should support this bill. I am sure that all members of this House recognize the importance of providing better service and faster turnaround times for our veterans. I am sure that all members endorse the objectives of streamlining the operations of government agencies, boards, and commissions.

In the recent days of remembering the veterans who fought and remembering the 50th anniversary of the ending of World War II, we saw many heart-rending circumstances. I remember on one occasion when I was in Holland with a number of members from this House of Commons we had ceremonies before our cenotaphs over there. In the Groesbeek cemetery, as