

DND/CF Back Grounder

News Room

Fit to Serve: Universality of Service and Related Support Programs

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In the civilian workplace, employees are generally obliged to perform only those duties specified in their job description. Military service is comparatively open-ended. The Canadian Forces (CF) principle of universality of service holds that all personnel must be capable at all times of performing a broad range of general military, common defense and security duties, in addition to the particular duties of their occupations.

The universality of service principle is also known as the “soldier first” principle, identifying the men and women of the CF as members of the profession of arms first – before they may be identified as pharmacists, logistics officers or pilots. Every member, regardless of their military occupation, regardless of whether their place of work is a desk, a ship or the cockpit of a CF-18, must meet the universality of service standards in order to remain in the CF.

The universality of service standards

The universality of service standards are very rigorous. Canadians should be proud of the men and women of their military for being able to meet them.

Among other things, CF personnel must be able to do the following:

- fire and maintain a personal weapon;
- conduct nuclear, biological and chemical drills;
- fight fires;
- administer first aid, including CPR;
- communicate using a radio;
- prepare written military correspondence;
- deploy on short notice to any geographical location, in any climate;
- work irregular or prolonged hours;
- function effectively on irregular or missing meals;
- travel as a passenger in any mode of transportation;
- perform under physical and mental stress; and
- perform with minimal medical support.

Additionally, because strength and endurance could mean the difference between success and failure in a military operation, CF personnel must be more physically fit than the general Canadian population. In order to meet the universality of service

standards, CF personnel are required to undergo an annual physical fitness evaluation, known as the CF EXPRES test, where they must meet a minimum physical fitness standard¹.

A legal basis

Universality of service has a legal basis. It is imposed by section 33(1) of the *National Defence Act*, which states that all Regular Force members are “at all times liable to perform any lawful duty.” The legislative imperative means that a member who can not “at all times ... perform any lawful duty” can not serve within the Regular Force, except during a carefully limited period of recovery from injury or illness or a period of transition out of the military and into civilian life.

Exceptions are few. CF personnel under the age of 18 can not be deployed to a theatre of hostilities, but they must remain fit enough to be able to deploy upon reaching age 18. Chaplains are not required to perform any duty other than those pertaining to their calling; accordingly, they are exempt from the requirement to perform general military duties and common defence and security tasks. However, they are required to be medically and physically fit and deployable. Section 33(2) of the *National Defence Act* foresees that Reserve Force members “may be called out on service to perform any lawful duty other than training at such times and in such manner as any regulations or otherwise are prescribed by the Governor in Council.” Since the Primary Reserve is given the role of directly supporting the Regular Force, operational effectiveness requires these Reservists to meet the universality of service standards. Personnel in other Reserve subcomponents – the Cadet Organizations and Training Services (COATS), the Canadian Rangers and the Supplementary Reserve – are only required to meet certain standards associated with universality of service, unless they are serving with the Regular Force or Primary Reserve; in the latter case the full universality of service standards must be met².

Medical release

The CF benefit from a strong commitment from the federal government, and significant increases in funding to fix, transform and expand Canada’s military. Most recently, this has resulted in the approval of the [Canada First Defence Strategy](#), which will allow the CF to grow over the next decade with a degree of certainty and coordination that was not previously possible. Under the CFDS, the CF will expand to a sustainable 100,000 (70,000 Regular Force and 30,000 Primary Reserve) by fiscal year 2027-28.

The CF remain committed to supporting ill and injured personnel as they progress through recovery, rehabilitation and return to work. At the same time, the CF are required to take those measures necessary to field a ready, operationally effective force in the defence of the nation. Illness or injury can make it challenging for a CF member to meet the universality of service standards, as can poor physical fitness. Rigorous fitness programs and routine evaluations ensure that military personnel maintain a high level of physical fitness.

Ill and injured personnel are given the time they need to recover, before any administrative action is taken with regards to their career. Once a member is considered to be medically stable, a permanent medical category is assigned, which may include medical employment limitations (MELs). Members who are assigned MELs of a temporary nature or permanent MELs that do not put the individual in breach of universality of service are not prevented from continued service with the CF. Essentially, a member will be identified as belonging to one of the following categories:

- a. Those who are assigned MELs of a temporary nature, and meet universality of service standards, or will likely meet them in the near future, will return to full service in their previous occupation.
- b. Those who are assigned MELs that place them in permanent breach of the universality of service standards, but who are employable in some capacity and wish to remain in the CF, may be retained for up to three years. This transitional period of service will be engaged only if a personnel shortage exists in the member's occupation, or there is a requirement for the member's particular skill set; otherwise, the member will be transitioned to civilian life.
- c. Those who are assigned MELs that place them in permanent breach of the universality of service standards, and who are not employable (or choose not to remain) in the CF, may be retained for a short period while awaiting their medical release. Upon release, they are entitled to a range of transition services and care under the purview of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC).

Regular Force and Primary Reserve members who have a medical condition that precludes their return to normal duty in a timely manner may be posted to the Joint Personnel Support Unit (JPSU) and either assigned to one of its component parts - an Integrated Personnel Support Centre (IPSC) - or transferred to the Service Personnel Holding List (SPHL) where an IPSC has not yet been stood up in the area. The JPSU provides a CF/VAC integrated "one-stop service" for ill and injured CF personnel and their families by facilitating access to care and support while personnel reintegrate into military life or explore new options in the civilian workplace. It supports currently serving and releasing CF personnel, both Regular Force and Reserve Force, and caters to both referrals and walk-in clients, to long-term injured personnel and to members considering retirement.³

As Table A demonstrates, about 1,000 Regular Force personnel have been medically released in each of the past five years.

TABLE A
Medical Releases From the
Regular Force, 2005-2009

Year	
2009	986
2008	988
2007	979
2006	1,150
2005	1,102

On average, 5,500 to 6,000 individuals leave the CF on an annual basis. Most people who leave the CF do so on a voluntary basis, not as a result of medical release. This annual attrition is a factor contributing to the constant renewal of CF personnel.

Support programs

VAC and the CF partner at many levels to care for ill and injured military personnel and their families. VAC has the legislated mandate to provide care and support for military personnel following release from the CF. When a member faces medical release, the CF work closely with VAC to establish a comprehensive, individualized management program including rehabilitation, vocational services such as job placement, financial assistance and emotional support to the injured CF member in the period leading up to, and after release. The financial compensation available to Reserve Force personnel may differ in some instances.⁴

A. Financial support

- The *Canadian Forces Superannuation Act* is the pension plan for all personnel of the Regular Force. It requires contributions from its participants, and benefits depend on the length of service.
- The Long Term Disability Group Insurance Program, a feature of the Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP), provides medically released CF personnel with income protection, and prepares them to obtain gainful civilian employment.
- The Accidental Dismemberment Insurance Plan, another feature of SISIP, provides a lump-sum benefit to CF personnel who have suffered dismemberment or loss of sight, hearing or speech that is attributable to military service. (This plan complements the Injured Military Members Compensation Act, an older legislation covering members for injuries suffered prior to February 12, 2003.)
- The Allowance in Lieu of Operational Allowances compensates for the loss of operational allowances paid to deployed personnel, in the event of a member being compelled to return from deployment due to illness or injuries sustained in theatre.

- Income support programs available to former CF personnel under the New Veterans Charter include the Earnings Loss Benefit while they are participating in the Rehabilitation Program (and longer, if the person is unable to work after rehabilitation), the Supplementary Retirement Benefit, CF Income Support and a Permanent Impairment Allowance.
- CF personnel and former personnel with a service-related disability may qualify for a VAC Disability Award, which is designed to compensate for the fact that an individual may experience the impact of a service-related disability or death in ways other than financial.
- CF personnel or former members in receipt of a VAC Disability Pension or Disability Award may qualify for funding for long-term care in a community facility or for access to the Veterans Independence Program if the need is related to their pensioned or awarded condition. The program provides a number of benefits, including personal care, housekeeping and grounds maintenance benefits to assist veterans in remaining independent in their own homes.

B. Vocational support

- The CF's Vocational Rehabilitation Program for Serving Members allows eligible personnel with an impending medical release up to six months in a civilian vocational rehabilitation training program, covering tuition fees, books, travel and other costs.
- Many CF bases and wings participate in the Second Career Assistance Network, which makes seminars, career counselling and access to a job bank available to personnel anticipating a career change.
- The CF's Skills Completion Program reimburses eligible Regular Forces personnel with 10 years' service the costs of upgrading their skills and education in order to transfer to a civilian career.
- The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) allows prospective employers access to a database of job applicants with military experience. TAP has resulted in dozens of private companies agreeing to post online employment offers specifically aimed at medically released personnel.
- The VAC vocational rehabilitation program will help a member determine whether it is possible to transfer their skills to another career. If not, the member may qualify for training to help obtain suitable civilian employment.
- VAC's Career Transition Services offer workshops, career counselling and job searches to releasing or released Regular Force personnel, some Reserve Force personnel and their survivors.

C. Additional support

- The CF Member Assistance Program provides external, short-term counselling to Regular Force personnel and their families, and to some Reserve Force personnel, who are seeking assistance outside military health services. The program is civilian-based in that it uses professional counsellors provided by the Employee Assistance Services of Health Canada.

- The Operational Stress Injury Social Support program (OSISS) provides peer support and family counselling to military personnel suffering from Operational Stress Injury (OSI), which includes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). OSISS also works to reduce the stigma attached to those suffering from PTSD/OSI through formal presentations and other communications tools. A joint CF-VAC initiative, the program was founded by a group of CF veterans.

Released CF personnel have access to the VAC Assistance Service, a confidential toll-free 24/7 counselling service delivered through a nation-wide team of professional counsellors. The service, which is provided through a Memorandum of Understanding between VAC and Health Canada, is accessed initially through a toll-free line.

¹ For more information on the CF EXPRES test, visit the Canadian Forces website Newsroom at <http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/news-nouvelles/view-news-afficher-nouvelles-eng.asp?id=2848>

² Regular Force personnel work full-time and have usually signed long-term contracts committing them to regular service. Primary Reserve personnel train regularly and may work alongside their Regular Force counterparts on a full-time basis. Other subcomponents of the Reserve Force are the Supplementary Reserve (former commissioned and non-commissioned members who could be called out in an emergency), Canadian Rangers (who constitute a military presence in isolated and sparsely settled areas of Canada) and the Cadet Instructors Cadre, or CIC (officers with administrative, instructive and supervisory responsibilities to the cadet program).

³ For more information on the JPSU, visit the Canadian Forces website Newsroom at <http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/news-nouvelles/news-nouvelles-eng.asp?cat=03&id=2880>

⁴ The Reserve Force Retirement Gratuity is a severance benefit for members of the Primary Reserve only. Reservists' eligibility for compensation under the Accidental Dismemberment Insurance Plan is governed by the terms of the contract under which they serve. Reservists incapable of completing the terms of their contract due to injury or illness attributable to service are entitled to pay and allowances until the termination of their contract. Compensation for disability due to injury or illness is payable when disability continues beyond the termination of the class of Reserve service during which it occurred. VAC services and benefits are available to ill or injured Reservists on the same basis as they are to Regular Force personnel, subject to eligibility provisions applicable to both groups.