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Ombudsman

National Defence and  
Canadian Armed Forces



Défense nationale et  
Forces armées canadiennes

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# ANNUAL REPORT

## 2023 - 2024



Report of the Office of the Ombudsman for National Defence and the  
Canadian Armed Forces to the Minister of National Defence

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Canada

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# Table of contents

Ombudsman’s message	<b>1</b>
Director General Operation’s message	<b>3</b>
Recognizing the Defence community: The <i>Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation</i>	<b>5</b>
Making a difference in the lives of our constituents	<b>6</b>
How we helped: a year in review	<b>8</b>
How we helped: investigating systemic issues	<b>12</b>
How we helped: connecting with constituents	<b>14</b>
• Educational products	<b>14</b>
• Engagements	<b>15</b>
— Outreach	<b>15</b>
— Parliamentary engagement	<b>15</b>
— Media	<b>15</b>
— International Engagements	<b>15</b>
• Digital engagement	<b>16</b>
— Website	<b>16</b>
— Military Benefits Browser	<b>16</b>
— Social media	<b>16</b>
Ombudsman’s Advisory Committee	<b>17</b>
Appendix 1—Financial statement	<b>18</b>
Appendix 2—Human resources	<b>19</b>



# Ombudsman's message

As we approach the end of another year, I reflect proudly on the work we have done in the last 12 months. This marks my final year in this position, and it has been an honour and privilege to lead this office—all for the benefit of our constituents.

Here are the key priorities my office focused on this year.

## **Independence**

I have been steadfast in advocating to Parliament for this office to be made truly independent. With a proper governance structure, the Office of the Ombudsman can better perform its functions as an independent oversight and complaints-resolution mechanism. I am hopeful that the government will act during the next Ombuds' tenure, so that this office can be more efficient in meeting our constituents' best interests, free from real or perceived political interference.

## **Civilian accountability**

In last year's Annual Report message, I referred to my office's increased interest in recurring issues to administrative decision-making and procedural fairness within the Department of National Defence (DND). There remain instances of unfairness on the civilian side that, despite my repeated insistence, have not yet been made right. The lack of accountability of senior civilian leadership in these instances are of significant concern, and if not corrected, will continue to be present during the tenure of my successor.

## **Language and Cultural Advisors**

In September 2023, I wrote to the Minister of National Defence to draw his attention to an issue impacting a small, but important, group of civilians who supported Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) operations in Afghanistan: the Language and Cultural Advisors (LCAs). These former LCAs are Canadian citizens, were term employees of the department, and were essential to CAF operations. Many served without pause or relief, in theatre, for over five years. Initially informed that their LCA employment would be within the relatively safe confines of Kandahar Airfield, they quickly found themselves shoulder-to-shoulder with CAF members on operations to Forward Operating Bases, villages, convoys, as well as various battlegrounds. Many former LCAs were reluctant to seek medical attention for serious mental health problems that developed after their return to Canada. This must be addressed.

I continue to advocate that the Minister use their authorities to create a program to address the gaps facing these individuals. Ministerial authority has been used in the past to address gaps in care and coverage for those who found themselves in situations where they did not have access to commensurate benefits and services to those who they served alongside. This must be done for the LCAs, and quickly.

## **Meeting with constituents: the importance of military families**

This year, my staff and I met over 3,500 of our constituents through outreach activities across Canada and in Belgium. The feedback we received during these visits demonstrated the importance of military families and the challenges they face in supporting our members. I have consistently urged the Minister and senior leadership, including the Seamless Canada table, to act on these issues. As I have said time and time again, our national security depends on well-supported CAF members and their military families.

## **Systemic investigations**

I believe that the CAF needs increased agility in the management of their personnel to sustain mission readiness. We have identified instances of unfairness and inequity resulting from the CAF's limited authority to resolve grievances related to military compensation and benefits. This is why, in August 2023, I launched a systemic review of CAF military complaint mechanisms. This review will result in two reports that contribute valuable insights and recommendations to enhance our military's complaint resolution processes.

We also initiated a comprehensive legal report analyzing the decision-making practices for civilian complaint mechanisms at the DND.

These reports are testaments to our dedication to procedural fairness and I look forward to them being published this spring and summer.

## ***Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation***

I was also honoured to award the *Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation* to four dedicated members of the Defence community on 19 October 2023. Again, I would like to congratulate these outstanding individuals for going the extra mile to resolve conflict and bring about positive and lasting change to the DND and the CAF.

Finally, as my mandate comes to an end, I want to express gratitude to my employees and colleagues for their dedication, professionalism, and commitment. They have never wavered when advocating for fairness for the Defence community. Their tireless efforts have made a profound impact on the lives of those we serve, and I am proud of the work we have accomplished together.

In the years to come, I look forward to seeing the positive impacts this office will continue to bring to the Defence community.

Gregory A. Lick  
Ombudsman

# Director General Operation's message

Throughout this year, we made significant strides to address the needs of the Defence community. Our first lines of contact handled more complaints than ever, a 31.5 per cent increase compared to 2022-23. We also noticed that the complexity of the complaints we received increased. In turn, this had significant negative impacts on the daily lives of some of our constituents. We are dedicated to answering complaints and inquiries with empathy, ensuring our constituents' voices are heard and acted upon in meaningful ways.

## 2023-2024 highlights:

- Responded to 2,044 new complaints.
- Closed 1,964 complaint files.
- Made 49 individual recommendations to the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). All 33 recommendations related to CAF member issues were accepted and implemented. The 16 remaining recommendations are related to civilian employee issues. The DND accepted and implemented nine, accepted but has not yet implemented two; and rejected five.
- Created and updated 10 educational products that help assist our constituents understand complex language and unclear policies, procedures and recourse mechanisms. (These are often difficult to navigate online and only available internally.)
- Published the *Hidden Battles* report about the challenges Primary Reserve Force members participating in domestic operations face to identify or access mental health resources. The Minister of National Defence accepted all six recommendations.
- Completed systemic reviews on CAF and civilian complaints mechanisms.
- Conducted 18 in-person engagements, including six Base and Wing visits with multiple meetings, two kiosks at conferences, nine in person presentations, and 15 virtual presentations.

Our office appeared in front of the National Defence Parliamentary Committee on three separate occasions, bringing light to critical issues within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Department of National Defence (DND). We addressed issues of transparency, housing challenges, and health services. Following the committee appearances, numerous recommendations have been proposed to foster positive developments within the Defence community in these areas.

The expansion of the Military Benefits Browser (MBB) is another major achievement. As a collaborative effort with the Director Casualty Support Management and in consultation with our constituents, we first launched the MBB in 2018. We aimed to simplify access and enhance awareness of the benefits and services available for medically releasing members. Through ongoing collaboration and strategic engagement with senior-level decision makers and partners, we will soon launch an expanded MBB, which will provide information on a wider spread of benefits for current and former CAF members and their families.

The high number of complaints addressed this year not only highlights the ongoing challenges within the Defence community, but also underscores the trust our constituents place in our office. The opportunity to continue making impactful changes motivates us and help us to strengthen further the trust between our office and those we serve.

I would also like to acknowledge our current Ombudsman, Gregory Lick, as he concludes his six-year tenure with our office. Greg's genuine commitment to helping constituents, and efforts in raising awareness of our office and mandate have contributed to positive changes within the Defence community.

Our achievements wouldn't have been possible without the dedication and hard work of our staff, as well as the collaboration of the DND, CAF, Staff of the Non-Public Funds Canadian Forces, and partners. If you feel that you have been treated unfairly, we are here to help.

Robyn Hynes  
Director General, Operations



# Recognizing the Defence community: The *Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation*

The *Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation* is an annual commendation that serves to recognize Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members, civilian employees and family members who go the extra mile and exceed expectations in helping their colleagues resolve a difficult problem or in bringing about positive and lasting change to the Department of National Defence (DND) and the CAF.

Liz Hoffman was an investigator with the Ombudsman's Office who had a deeply rooted sense of fairness and was a tremendous force for positive change. This commendation allows the Office to recognize those in the Defence community who, like Liz, are dedicated to helping others and making a difference.

It was an honour to recognize this year's recipients of the *Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation*: Sailor First Class Matthew Raniowski, Ms. Lana Costello, Mrs. Alyssa Truong and Ms. Alli Jones.



From left to right: Ombudsman Gregory A. Lick, Ms. Lana Costello, Sailor First Class Matthew Raniowski, Mrs. Alyssa Truong and Dr. Andrea Hoffman.

# Making a difference in the lives of our constituents

## Honouring a member's service and career on their tombstone

A family contacted us on behalf of the estate of a deceased CAF member.

They were concerned that the rank that would appear on the member's headstone at the National Military Cemetery (NMC) would not represent the member's rank at retirement. The family raised their concerns with the NMC but were informed that since the service history database showed that the member retired as a Major, this was the rank that would be placed on the headstone.

As they were not able to resolve their concerns with the NMC, the family contacted us for help. Our investigator contacted the CAF Liaison Officer (LO) for the NMC and provided them with CAF documentation that showed that the member retired at the rank of Lieutenant-Commander. After a thorough review, CAF LO agreed that Lieutenant-Commander was the appropriate rank to honor the service and career of the CAF member.

To assist with future issues, our investigator also recommended that the NMC include a CAF point of contact for military funeral inquiries in their template letter to families. The CAF LO accepted our recommendation.

## Reinstating survivor pension and medical benefits

The surviving spouse of a CAF member contacted us about their benefits. The Government of Canada had suspended their survivor pension and medical benefits and delayed issuing their Supplementary Death Benefit (SDB) payment. As a result, the surviving spouse was facing a significant financial burden, including paying out of pocket for medical expenses.

Given the negative financial impact, our investigator immediately contacted the appropriate Government of Canada organization to ensure that they were aware of the file and the impacts of the delay. Six business days after our engagement, the SDB payment was issued to the surviving spouse and the application for the survivor benefit was prioritized for review.

## **Determining the status of a damage claim**

CAF members contacted our office about the processing of their claim for damages to their personal property.

More specifically, they were experiencing delays with their claim for damages to their personal property following an accidental fire in a military establishment. Due to the lengthy process, lack of updates and the financial impacts on the members, they contacted our office for help. Our complaint analyst and investigator engaged with the appropriate authorities to ensure that the claims were not being unnecessarily delayed. We were able to determine the status and whereabouts of the claims. We also ensured that the members were provided regular updates until their claims were processed and payments were received.

## **Resolving delayed reclassification and payments**

A civilian employee contacted us about a position reclassification issue. The DND approved the reclassification in December 2022. This entitled the employee to retroactive payments from 2014 to 2022. However, the payment of approximately \$100,000 was delayed by almost one year. Despite the employee's repeated efforts, they did not receive either the payment or the position reclassification. Through our interventions and a thorough analysis of the complaint, we were able to help the employee successfully resolve their issue in a timely manner, including both the retroactive payments and the position reclassification.

# How we helped: a year in review

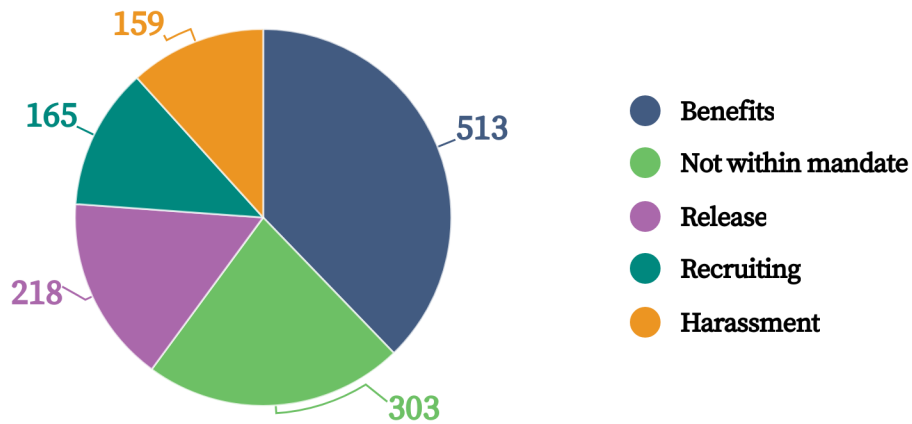
Members of the Defence community can contact us if they have been treated unfairly, if they are looking for information, or if they are uncertain about how to deal with an issue.

Our constituents can:

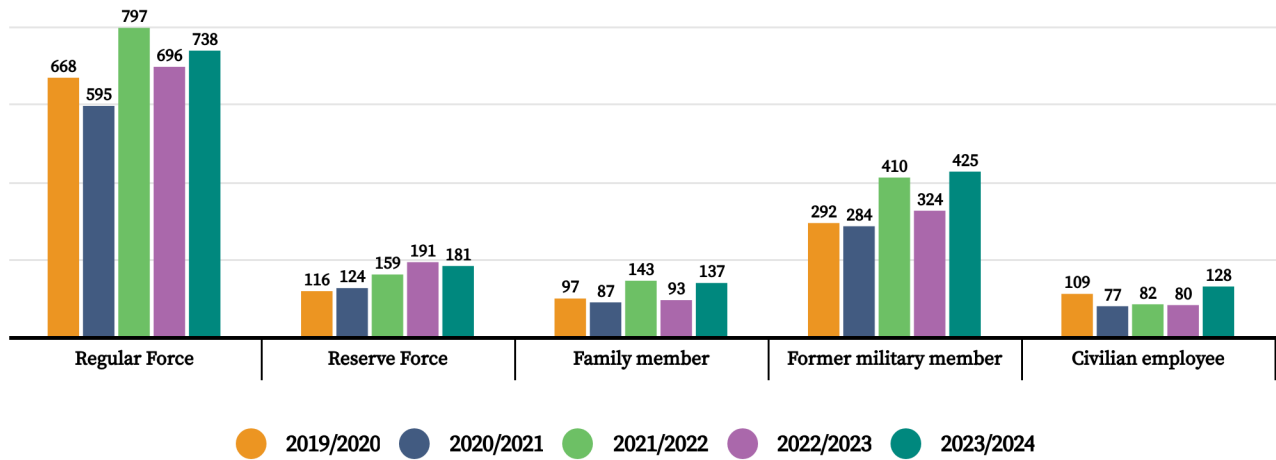
- Call us toll-free at 1-888-828-3626
- Submit a question or complaint through our secure online form
- Live chat with an agent
- Book a phone call with an agent
- Email an agent for information or assistance
- Email for general office inquiries

Our website, [ombuds.ca](http://ombuds.ca), explains how we can help.

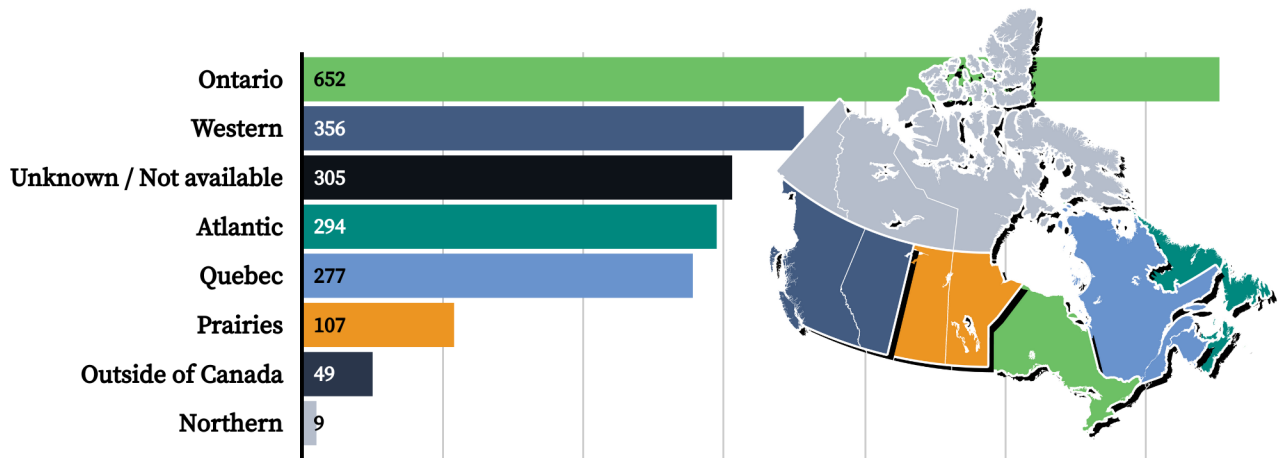
## Top new case categories



## New cases by constituent groups (The groups who contact our Office the most often)



## Origin of cases



## Sample cases

Sample cases are available on our website, [ombuds.ca](http://ombuds.ca), which describe the types of cases we handle. The new cases do not include contacts we have received through our live chat and email.

**Case information for 2023–2024**

Total cases handled	<b>2,402</b>
New cases	<b>2,044</b>
Cases carried over from previous fiscal year	<b>234</b>
Cases re-opened	<b>124</b>
Cases in progress	<b>246</b>
Cases closed at Intake	<b>1,770</b>
Information or assistance provided	<b>1,134</b>
Outside mandate	<b>167</b>
Referred to existing mechanisms	<b>209</b>
Withdrawn	<b>98</b>
Abandoned	<b>162</b>
Cases closed at Complaint Resolution	<b>74</b>
Informal resolution	<b>29</b>
Information or assistance provided	<b>35</b>
Withdrawn	<b>6</b>
Referred to existing mechanisms	<b>2</b>
Cases closed at Investigation	<b>120</b>
Information or assistance provided	<b>66</b>
Unfounded	<b>14</b>
Informal resolution	<b>5</b>
Referred to existing mechanisms	<b>3</b>
Investigated: No follow up required	<b>18</b>
Abandoned	<b>6</b>
Withdrawn	<b>8</b>

We address both complex and compelling individual cases by thoroughly reviewing and investigating individual complaints. We ensure the fair treatment of constituents by engaging with and making sound and informed recommendations to the DND and CAF, when necessary.

In 2023-24, the General Investigations team closed 120 files: 108 files related to CAF members (current and former) and 12 files related to civilian DND employees (current and former). The office also conducted two process reviews on two civilian files that required individual recommendations.

As a result of individual investigations and process reviews, we made 49 individual recommendations to the CAF/DND. All 33 recommendations related to CAF member issues were accepted and implemented. The 16 remaining recommendations related to civilian employee issues. The DND accepted 11 of these recommendations and rejected five. Of the accepted recommendations, the DND has implemented nine but has not yet implemented two.

This is the breakdown of our recommendations as they relate to our mandate:

<b>Recommendations made by mandate section to DND and the CAF</b>	<b>Total recommendations made</b>	<b>Individual recommendations accepted</b>
36(a)–Referred to the competent authority for further consideration	13	12
36(b)–Omission should be rectified	11	11
36(c)–Decision/recommendation should be quashed/substituted	5	4
36(d)–A law/policy/practice on which a decision, recommendation, act/omission was based should be reviewed	4	3
36(e)–Reasons should have been given for a decision/recommendation	2	2
36(f)–Delay should be rectified	5	5
36(g)–Other steps should be taken to achieve substantial and long-lasting improvements to the welfare of employees and members	9	7
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>44</b>

# How we helped: investigating systemic issues

Systemic investigations and progress reports are available on our website.

## Systemic Investigation with a focus on mental health

In September 2023, we published *Hidden Battles: A systemic investigation into the identification of mental health needs and support for Primary Reserve members participating in domestic operations*. We looked at how DND/CAF treated Primary Reserve members compared to Regular Force members in identifying their mental health needs and providing mental health support before, during, and after domestic operations. The investigation revealed:

- inconsistencies related to mental health, including barriers to accessing supports before, during, and after a domestic operation;
- a lack of procedural oversight to identify and support mental health needs;
- cultural challenges such as self-imposed, social, and structural stigmas that continue to be a barrier to accessing mental health supports; and
- limits to mental health care access caused by the class of Reserve Service employment before or after a domestic operation.

We made six recommendations for the DND/CAF to implement by fall 2025.

This report follows our progress reports on three reports from 2016 and 2017 on the health and wellness of Reserve Force members. The CAF and the DND have still not implemented most of the recommendations in these reports.

## Review of Civilian Complaint Mechanisms

My office has conducted a review of civilian complaint mechanisms within the DND, with a focus on procedural fairness: the workplace harassment and violence resolution (WHVP) process, the individual civilian grievance process, and anticipated updates to the disclosure of wrongdoing (whistleblower) process. Our intent is to identify any deficiencies in procedural fairness and make recommendations to address them, as well as to identify best practices for successful and fair decision-making.

We anticipate publishing a report in the summer of 2024 that addresses the DND's WHVP and individual civilian grievance processes. We hope to publish an accompanying piece addressing the DND's whistleblowing process once the anticipated updates to that process have been finalized.



## Systemic review of military complaints mechanisms

In August 2023, we launched a review of the military complaint mechanisms, focussing on two areas:

- how the CAF handles members' health care complaints, and
- scenarios where CAF members have limited or no right to grieve.

The recommendations we make in our two reports aim to complement the ongoing initiatives within the CAF. We anticipate publishing the first report in spring and the second one early summer 2024.

## Follow-up on recommendations

We conducted follow-ups to assess how the DND and the CAF are implementing the recommendations we made in nine previous reports. We will publish these progress reports by the summer of 2024.

The Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN) released its report, *Canadian Armed Forces Health Care and Transition Services*, in November 2023. This report reiterates many recommendations made by our office since 2013 and demonstrates that much work remains. We have posted a side-by-side comparison of our recommendations and NDDN's on our website.



# How we helped: connecting with constituents

## Educational products

We prepare content based on our analysis of intake cases, constituent engagements, and meetings with pertinent players. This year we focussed on updating and streamlining the information we provide online, as well as creating new products to support the theme and recommendations from our systemic investigations. The following is a list of our latest educational products:

- **Recourse and Complaint Mechanisms–CAF:**
  - Filing a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission
  - Recourse for Career Issues
  - CAF grievances
- **Recourse and Complaint Mechanisms–Civilian:**
  - Complaint Mechanisms Disclosure of Wrongdoing (PSDPA)
- **Military Life Events:**
  - Service Estates



We are working on more educational products to help CAF members make informed decisions when using CAF complaint mechanisms.

# Engagements

## Outreach

**33** outreach activities, and over  
**3,500** constituents engaged.



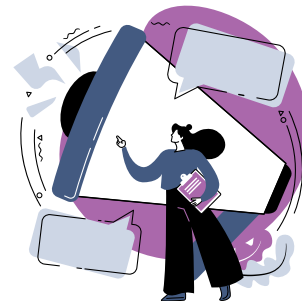
## Parliamentary engagement

**1** meeting with a Senator  
**9** meetings with Members of Parliament  
**4** meetings with Provincial Legislators  
**3** appearances before the House Standing  
Committee on National Defence

## Media

**6** media interviews  
**7** written responses\*  
**4** op-eds  
**10** mentions in print and online media  
**1** mention in transcripts

\*Written media responses do not include proactive media pushes (including phone calls) as they are not tracked in our current metrics.



## International Engagements

**2** international engagements (International  
Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the  
Armed Forces and SHAPE - Brussels)

# Digital engagement

## Website

**396,779** total page views  
**67,224** less page views than 2022–2023\*  
**101.4%** of target



\*Our content rationalization project resulted in many pages being flagged as out of date or irrelevant. Pages were removed from the site and links to DND/CAF were provided. Reviewed and relevant content will be added back to the site, subject to a content life cycle review plan. Given the reduction in pages, new targets were set using quarter one as a baseline.



## Military Benefits Browser

### Total sessions by users (previously called visitors)

**12,792 sessions** (up 94% from 2022–2023)  
**10,646 users** (up 108% from 2022–2023)

## Social media

**3** social media channels  
**6** accounts  
**7,068** followers  
**789** more followers than 2022–2023  
**152%\*** of target



\*The success in meeting the target for social media followers was primarily driven by two Facebook boosts for educational products during quarter four, significantly increasing our follower count.

# Ombudsman's Advisory Committee

We engaged the Ombudsman's Advisory Committee throughout the year to leverage their expertise and solicit their views about our priorities. We briefed the Committee on our systemic investigations, and they provided us with their invaluable advice. The Committee was also engaged in the nominations for the *Liz Hoffman Memorial Commendation*.



# Appendix 1—Financial statement

In 2023–2024, our office was allocated a budget of \$8,727,463. Actual expenditures totalled \$8,371,183.92 of which \$7,533,795.95 was related to salaries.

The difference between the approved budget and actual expenditures represents final spending as provided in the Public Accounts of Canada.

Money that remains unspent is returned to the Department throughout the fiscal year as part of its quarterly reporting process. In 2023–2024, we returned a total of \$260,170 worth of non-salary related funds, and \$75,000 worth of Vote 5 funds related to Asset Pooled Items and Capital Assets.

Funds were returned due to delays in establishing contracts and delays in the receipt of goods due to supply chain challenges with vendors.

Mail and courier services	\$5,017
Supplies/furniture	\$29,692
Training and professional dues	\$75,941
Acquisition and rental of office equipment	\$50,297
Network maintenance and support	\$0
Telecommunications and IT connections	\$124,850
Travel and transportation	\$65,510
Communications and public outreach	\$65,232
Professional and special services	\$420,848
Minor Capital and Asset Pooled Item	\$0
Salaries	\$7,533,796
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$8,371,183</b>

# Appendix 2—Human resources



## Our employees

Overall indeterminate, casual, and term employee count: **70**

Overall employee count at year-end (including students): **73**

Full-time employee count at year-end: **75.90**

# Ombudsman

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Canadian Armed Forces



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**We are ready  
to help.**

**Nous sommes prêts  
à vous aider.**

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