

Rally highlights impact of losing Brandon Veterans Affairs office

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By Lindsey Enns

NEAR BOISSEVAIN — Holding a bright orange sign with "stop if you support our veterans" written across it in black marker, Jennifer Grant was hoping to catch drivers heading home after a long weekend near the Boissevain border crossing.

Grant is president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada Prairie Region Westman Area Council, which organized a rally in support of local veterans on Monday afternoon.

Only a handful of people joined the rally, but invites were extended to Westman veterans and politicians.

The rally coincided with two others taking place at the Emerson and Sprague border crossings.

It has been more than a year since Brandon's Veterans Affairs Canada office and eight others across the country were closed as part of government-wide cuts aimed at balancing the federal budget.

Since Brandon's office shut its doors, veterans across Westman have lost crucial in-person services, Grant said, adding they would like to see the local office reopened.

"We're seeing the effects," Grant said.

"Call-in centres are hard to access, you don't have a local office anymore and they don't have connections anymore."

Although the government assured veterans that there would be case managers available in every city where an office was closed, they are having trouble keeping up with the demand.

"It feels like a betrayal," Prairie Region Westman Area Council representative Glen Johnston said, adding he wasn't speaking on behalf of all veterans. "My dad was a veteran and just when all this started happening, I thought of what his reaction would have been and I think he would have been shocked."

Johnston's father served in the Second World War and died in 1993.

Knowing what he knows now about post-traumatic stress disorder, Johnston said he would have recognized the symptoms in his own father and got him the proper help.

"You've got people who are injured, people who have had their limbs shot off ... to me we have an obligation to support these people," Johnston said. "When you close an office that's supposed to be there to help them, to me, that seems like you're abandoning them."

Among the small group of those braving the blowing snow and cold to rally outdoors yesterday was Boissevain resident David Neufeld.

"I just get so angry when I see people being disrespected ... but especially people who put their lives at risk," Neufeld said. "I'm a person who respects what the veterans have done."

Those rallying also asked drivers who pulled over to sign a mailout addressed to Prime Minister Stephen Harper asking him to reopen all nine offices that were closed in January 2014.

"More than 17,000 new and traditional veterans and their families relied on these offices for front-line services," the letter reads. "Placing one Veterans Affairs worker in the nearest Service Canada outlet will not make up for losing a fully staffed Veterans Affairs office."

Brandon-Souris Conservative MP Larry Maguire said in an emailed statement to the Sun that local veterans still have access to front-line services via the Service Canada building in Brandon, where a full-time Veteran Affairs staff member provides the same services to veterans as before.

There are also Service Canada outlet locations in Virden, Killarney, Carberry and Deloraine. Veterans also have access to the Veterans Affairs office at CFB Shilo, which employs experienced case workers, Maguire said.

"If any veteran still has issues accessing services, I urge them to contact my office," he said. "Even though a lot has been done, I will continue to work with local veterans to improve the programs and the support they rely on."

Link to story (paywalled):

<http://www.brandonsun.com/breaking-news/rally-highlights-impact-of-losing-brandon-veterans-affairs-office-292181761.html?thx=y>