

Restorative Engagement Program Evaluation Summary

Program Overview

The Restorative Engagement (RE) Program, a requirement of the Canadian Armed Forces – Department of National Defence Sexual Misconduct Class Action Settlement, was approved in November 2019. It was designed and implemented by the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre in consultation with subject matter experts, as well as internal and external stakeholders (including individuals affected by sexual misconduct). As part of the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre, the RE Program is outside the Canadian Armed Forces chain of command and investigation processes but is within the Department of National Defence civilian organizational structure. It officially launched in November 2021 and is expected to conclude in March 2026. The RE Program was allocated a budget of \$58.9 million between 2021 and 2026.

The RE Program uses a restorative approach **to acknowledge, understand and learn from the harm done by sexual misconduct and to contribute to culture change**. It places people at the centre of its work and aims to provide opportunities for members of the class-action lawsuit (class members) to share their experiences, impacts or insights about sexual misconduct. The RE Program provides opportunities for class members to be heard, acknowledged and responded to through an engagement session with a representative from the Defence Team (Defence representatives). Class members do not meet directly with the individual who harmed them. Specially trained restorative practitioners (RP) facilitate the engagement sessions between class members and Defence representatives.

Through the RE Program, Defence representatives participate in small cohorts where they practise reflective learning in sessions facilitated by RPs. Defence representatives learn about sexual misconduct while acquiring knowledge, skills and experience in using a restorative approach when engaging with others. Through this work, Defence representatives are prepared to meaningfully engage with class members, during which they are provided with the opportunity to acknowledge the harm done and learn from class members to understand the impacts of sexual misconduct. Defence representatives are supported by the RE Program to plan for, act on and lead contributions to culture change across all levels and ranks in the Defence Team.

Overall Assessment

The RE Program is a relevant and innovative initiative that offers the Defence Team the opportunity to acknowledge the harm endured by those impacted by sexual misconduct and introduce the concept of restorative approaches to the organization. Despite many implementation challenges, staff were able to offer a program that had an almost universally positive impact on the participants, as reported by those who took part in the evaluation. However, the impacts of the RE Program on the wider organization are unknown.

While it is intended that Defence representatives will incorporate restorative approaches into their daily work, there is no strategic plan for supporting the dissemination of their knowledge across the Defence Team. This poses a risk that the positive impacts achieved by the RE Program may remain with Defence representatives alone or fade out over time. When attempting to effectively address negative cultural norms that allow for sexual misconduct to take place, the Defence Team should consider how its efforts can be shared across the organization and sustained over time.

Findings

1. The RE Program aligns with the Final Settlement Agreement and the organization’s culture change priorities regarding sexual misconduct.
2. The RE Program demonstrated adaptability in responding to various implementation challenges while maintaining operational efficiency by staying within budget.
3. While evaluation participants reported positive program effects, the impact of the RE Program on Defence Team culture is yet to be determined.

Recommendation

Ensure class members’ and Defence representatives’ insights are strategically integrated into the Defence Team’s culture change efforts.

Future Considerations

Any future RE initiatives should consider the following:



1. Maintain ongoing communication with program participants/interested parties to keep them informed of program progress and impact.
2. Collaborate with the Defence Team to provide transition support for participating Defence representatives as culture change agents.
3. Create a performance measurement framework at the outset of implementation to monitor progress and success.

NOTE: The evaluation team invited all class members who expressed interest in the RE Program to participate in the evaluation. However, only 23 class members responded to the survey, and 18 class members consented to be interviewed. Of those class members who participated in the evaluation, all but one met with Defence representatives; therefore, information is not available regarding why other class members chose not to participate in the RE Program or only chose to meet with an RP and not a Defence representative.

What is a restorative approach?

A restorative approach is a relational way of responding to harm. The principles of a restorative approach are:

- focusing on the importance of relationships;
- following a comprehensive and holistic approach to understanding the causes and impacts of harm on individuals and culture;
- using inclusive and participatory processes and activities;
- being responsive to the needs of the participant;
- focusing on individual and collective responsibility for harm; and
- using a collaborative and non-adversarial approach to addressing harm.

International Comparisons

The Defence Team RE Program shares similarities with Australia’s Restorative Engagement Program, New Zealand’s Project RESTORE and the Royal Canadian Military Police’s Restorative Justice Program in their use of trained restorative facilitators and a victim-centred approach. While not identical programs, the Defence Team RE and Australian programs both focus on facilitated conversations between a representative of the military and those affected by sexual misconduct.

By comparison, the other programs focus on facilitating a victim-offender dialogue. The Australian program is also outside of the military institution while the Defence Team RE Program is outside the chain of command and reports to the Deputy Minister on the civilian side of the Defence Team.