

59 suicides: Canada is failing its troops



News that 59 Canadian soldiers and veterans who served in Afghanistan have killed themselves is an indication of how Ottawa and the military are failing those men and women who have bravely served our country, says Toronto civil litigator [Sarah O'Connor](#).

"That's a staggering number — it's more than one-third of all those Canadians killed in the war itself," she tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#).

O'Connor, the principal of [O'Connor Richardson Professional Corporation](#), says most people aren't aware of the lack of support available to soldiers coming home from dangerous deployments, such as the one in Afghanistan.

"Many are denied long-term or short-term disability, and then there are the costs associated with appealing those decisions," she says. "For many, it's a struggle to get Veterans Affairs to recognize their disabilities."

As revelations of the suicide numbers become public, advocates are calling for more action to help military personnel cope after being deployed overseas, says the [Globe and Mail](#).

Canada was involved in a combat mission in Afghanistan in 2011 and a training mission there in 2014, says the article.

The military has said at least 59 soldiers have committed suicide, says the newspaper.

"Some struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and the military's universality-of-service rule — which removes soldiers from the Canadian Forces if they are deemed unfit to deploy. *The Globe* found there was a shortage of mental-health staff and support programs and that the military's process for releasing mentally wounded soldiers from the army left many who still wanted to serve feeling lost and betrayed," says the article.

After several veterans filed a lawsuit against the government in 2014, federal lawyers said Ottawa has no special obligation to those who've fought wars on behalf of Canada, reported [CTV News](#).

O'Connor points to how the new Liberal government had promised during the election campaign that Ottawa would invest \$100 million per year to boost supports for families who are caring for veterans with physical or mental-health issues.

She's hopeful that the new government will bring a different stance to the issue.

O'Connor says it raises a question about what sort of legal duty the federal government has when it comes to soldiers who have served their country overseas.

"What duty does the government owe our veterans coming home?" she says. "This could become a question of legal liability because no one has taken adequate responsibility for helping military personnel coming home. There simply aren't enough supports available."

To launch a legal case, she says, one would have to show that the government had a duty of care to these soldiers or there was some fiduciary duty to them that wasn't fulfilled — or that the government was willfully blind to the post-traumatic stress disorder problems.

O'Connor knows firsthand the struggles some veterans experience in trying to access benefits. She volunteered for an organization, Lawyers for Veterans, which did pro bono work for vets who appealed their benefits decisions. The organization no longer exists because it simply couldn't keep up with the demand for legal service, she says.

"Most of the veterans don't have the legal resources to fight independently — they would need to band together," she says.