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REPORT ON THE LAST POST FUND

MARCIA YOUNG (CBC-R): Veterans' advocates are upset with the way a federal program is treating some veterans and their widows. The Last Post Fund was set up to help bury veterans in financial need. But groups like the War Amps of Canada say the fund's bar seems to be set too high.

Laura Bain has the story of one widow's efforts to get help.

MURIEL WILCOX (Widow): We have all kinds of pictures around of him, you know. In the front room there's our wedding picture and of our 50th anniversary.

LAURA BAIN (reporter): Muriel Wilcox sits in an easy chair in the living room of her house. The room is decorated with pictures of her late husband, Harold, who died 13 years ago. He fought in the Second World War.

MURIEL WILCOX: It's a standard letter.

LAURA BAIN: The 87 year-old widow's hands tremble slightly as she read the letter she recently got from the War Amputations of Canada.

MURIEL WILCOX: Based on our records in the service bureau, you did not receive any financial benefits from the Last Post Fund and therefore we are enclosing a cheque in the amount of \$3,600 in accordance to our new policy and at a minimum we will be requesting that the government provide a memorial cross to all our widows in recognition of Canada's debt of gratitude to our war amputee community. It is the least that the Minister can do.

LAURA BAIN: The money War Amps sent her is to compensate for the fact that she never received money from the Last Post Fund, a century-old federal program meant for funerals and burials of fallen soldiers. War Amps says few vets or their widows are getting money from the fund.

It says two-thirds of all applications are rejected. War Amps says it even rejects claims from veterans who were seriously injured in the war.

MURIEL WILCOX: My husband was hurt exactly one week before the end of the war and he came home on the hospital ship in 1945, August 1945. We were going to get married at Christmas but he came home in a complete body cast.

LAURA BAIN: Muriel says Harold was in and out of the hospital every year. He had to have both his legs amputated and complications from his war injuries plagued him for his whole life.

MURIEL WILCOX: Oh, dear, I can't even think of all the operations he had but a lot of them. Over 75 anyways. He tried to do a lot of things that there was so much that he couldn't do because of the amputations. But it wasn't an easy for either one of us, really. But we tried.

LAURA BAIN: A few weeks ago, on Remembrance Day, both the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Prime Minister pledged their commitment to supporting veterans. They said the government is investing billions of dollars in new programs, particularly for veterans in most need. But according to War Amps, nearly a third of all seriously disabled veterans still don't meet the Last Post Fund's restrictive rules.

Brian Forbes is the Chairman of War Amps Canada.

BRIAN FORBES (Chairman, War Amps Canada): For many years we've been petitioning the government to basically demand that Veterans Affairs amend the appalling state of the regulations that govern the administration of the Last Post Fund. It's quite deplorable.

LAURA BAIN: Forbes says seriously disabled veterans should qualify for the Last Post Fund automatically and without question. And their widows should be honoured by the government with the memorial cross.

But like the money, Forbes says only a third of War Amputee widows have received the medal.

BRIAN FORBES: It's very difficult for us to be able to explain to a widow that she's not only not going to get the funding, but she's not going to receive the memorial cross. And quite frankly, that's appalling.

LAURA BAIN: Forbes says War Amps Canada will keep pressure on the government. They'll continue to push for changes to the Last Post Fund's

regulations. But so far, he says the government hasn't made any concrete plans to put more money into the program.

The Ministry of Veterans Affairs says the program is under constant review and they'll assess its efficiency going forward.

MURIEL WILCOX: That was just his picture not too long before he died, really.

LAURA BAIN: Muriel Wilcox says all she can do is hope the government will do the right thing and honour her husband who fought and was seriously wounded in the service of his country.

MURIEL WILCOX: We're just hoping that the government does come through and that everybody will get this money and the cross and we'll be all happy and be very proud that the government for finally having backbone and coming through with it, you know. So I'd like to get it before I die, you know. It would be nice to have it.

LAURA BAIN: Laura Bain, CBC News, Toronto.
