

SECRETARY

OPENING STATEMENT

SENATE ESTIMATES – 26 FEBRUARY 2025

WORD COUNT: 735 (Approx 5 minutes)

Good evening, Chair and Senators.

I'd like to make a brief opening statement to update the Committee on some key developments since our last appearance.

Legislation Reform

The Australian Parliament's recent passing of legislation to simplify and harmonise the veterans' legislation framework is an important milestone for the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and the veteran community.

It is the most significant legislative reform of Australia's veteran support system in a century and delivers on recommendation 1 of the Interim Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Under the changes made by *Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Act 2025* an improved *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA) will apply to all claims for compensation lodged from 1 July 2026.

DVA is now working towards commencement of these changes. We have developed a communication and education plan, including a roadshow which commenced this week, to ensure the veteran community is aware of the changes and how they might be impacted.

Royal Commission

As you're aware, the Government released its response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide on 2 December last year.

Implementing the Government's response and delivering on the agreed recommendations continues to be our key priority.

DVA will soon be commencing a co-design process, with the veteran community, of a new agency focused on wellbeing to be established within DVA, as recommended by the RC and agreed in the Government response and will also be consulting on the development of a national ex-service organisation peak body.

Consultations with the veteran community will commence in March and will continue through until June.

Claims

Turning now to claims. Since the unallocated claims backlog identified by the Royal Commission was cleared in February last year, DVA has continued to improve our service to the veteran community. Through investment by Government of 500 additional staff since June 2022, we are finalising more claims than ever before, faster than ever before.

Of the 41,799 backlog of claims, identified in the Royal Commission's Interim report, as at 31 January 2025, 98 per cent have now been allocated and determined.

Despite significant growth in the number of claims being lodged by veterans, our data shows continuous improvement in our services. New claims continue to be lodged at a rate of around 4,000 claims every two weeks. Claims received this financial year are 20 per cent higher than the same time last year. Those received in 2023-24 were 24 per cent higher than 2022-23. With current staffing levels DVA is currently allocating over 98 per cent of new Initial Liability claims to a staff member within two weeks of receipt which is a key indicator of preventing any new allocation backlog occurring again.

Our productivity continues to improve. For example, in the week ending 23 February 2025, we finalised 2,193 claims, the highest number ever in a single week.

For MRCA IL claims received in the last year, these are on average being processed in 100 days.

With regard to support for veterans submitting claims to DVA, advocates continue to play a pivotal role in Australia's veteran support system. Consultation conducted towards the end of last year resulted in broad support being expressed for an Institute of Veterans' Advocates. DVA is now working with an interim board to establish the Institute. The Institute will provide leadership and support, set competency and training standards, and accredit and register advocates. The Institute will also promote the availability of quality free advocacy services for all veterans. The Institute will strengthen governance of members and will be able to take action to address poor behaviour where and if this occurs.

DVA continues to work collaboratively with the advocate sector in other ways to improve the level of support and information available to advocates. The Claims Lodgement Assistance Program gives advocates access to support from DVA staff before and during the lodgement of a claim, which strengthens the quality of incoming claims, benefiting both veterans and the Department. Claims Lodgement Assistance is currently being delivered in WA, South Australia, Tasmania, ACT and New South Wales, and feedback from advocates, Ex-Service Organisations, and DVA staff involved has been very positive.

Finally as we approach Anzac Day DVA is continuing to work to prepare for overseas commemorative events that are tracking to levels of attendance not seen since the Centenary of Anzac period. For the first time ever the DVA working party will include veterans and family members who will work alongside DVA staff to help deliver these hugely significant events

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

