

## SECRETARY'S OPENING STATEMENT

### ADDITIONAL BUDGET ESTIMATES – 10 MARCH 2026

**WORD COUNT: 911 (Approx 6 minutes)**

#### **Royal Commission and key initiatives coming into effect this year**

2026 will be a significant year for the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) as we continue to implement key recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Two critical recommendations accepted by Government will become a reality from 1 July.

Firstly, the *Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Act 2025* will come into force and see veterans, and families of veterans, able to receive the supports they need and deserve, faster, leading to improved outcomes.

New claims for compensation and rehabilitation received on or after 1 July will be determined under an improved version of the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* as the single ongoing Act. This will provide a single, clearer pathway for accessing support and make it easier for veterans to understand and navigate.

DVA continues to communicate extensively with the veteran community and advocate about the upcoming changes so they are well informed and can plan for their individual circumstances.

Secondly, the new *Veteran and Family Wellbeing Agency* will begin operation. The recent Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) provided \$78 million over 4 years to establish the agency, which implements Recommendation 87 of the Royal Commission's Final Report and provides for the coordinated delivery of related Recommendations 80, 81 and 86.

The Agency will focus on the successful transition from military to civilian life, community connection and improving wellbeing.

Initially, the agency will focus on supporting at-risk veterans transitioning from the ADF, with the view to expanding capability as the agency grows.

These two milestones are the culmination of extensive consultative and developmental work by DVA staff and I thank them for their extraordinary efforts as we bring these initiatives to fruition.

This work also builds on the significant progress achieved in 2025 on delivering the Government's response to the Royal Commission, with 32 recommendations implemented by the end of last year.

### **Wellbeing focus**

The establishment of the wellbeing agency and other initiatives underscore a shift to a deeper focus, across DVA and the entire veteran support system, on the wellbeing of veterans and families of veterans.

In MYEFO, the Government provided \$739.2 million over 4 years to facilitate better long-term health and wellbeing outcomes for veterans, including prioritising up-front early intervention and treatment, incentivising the provision of Mental Health Care Plans, and a national PTSD treatment study.

This improved access to treatment will support veterans to receive the right care as early as possible, supporting their long-term wellbeing and improving their quality of life.

### **Claims, Integrity and advocacy activities**

Claims for compensation continue to increase year on year. Claims received in the financial year to January 2026 constitute a 10% increase on the record numbers received last year. In response to this, however, DVA teams continue to make record determinations and, most importantly, the vast majority of Initial Liability claims are being allocated within 14 days. MRCA Initial Liability claims received and determined in the last 12 months took on average around 120 days to process, which means that veterans are getting access to the health services and payments they may need while follow on claims for permanent impairment are being assessed. From next week, DVA will commence a pilot with the Queensland RSL using AI to support the preparation of summaries to assist delegates in making initial liability claims. The pilot

operates on a voluntary consent basis and is subject to strict privacy and information security standards.

To improve processing times for Permanent Impairment claims we are in the process of bringing in additional resources to review claims and confirm if the medical reports and information on record is adequate to enable a delegate decision, and to implement an outbound call strategy to update veterans on the progress of their claims.

In addition to these efforts to improve processing efficiency DVA's work to strengthen the integrity of the veteran support system continues at pace.

In MYEFO, the Government provided \$203.1 million over four years to strengthen DVA's provider integrity capability, support free veteran advocacy services, combat fraud activity, and support the operations of the new Institute of Veterans Advocacy (IVA).

The Department stood up a new Provider Integrity Division last December. The team is focused on detecting and addressing unethical and fraudulent practices by service providers and advocates. I put on the record that the vast majority do the right thing, however there are those who do not, and we are committed to ensuring veterans are not exploited and their own entitlements eroded by unnecessary fees.

In December 2025, the Government tabled its response to the Senate Inquiry into *Issues relating to advocacy services for veterans accessing compensation and income support*, agreeing or agreeing-in-principle to six of the Committee's seven recommendations.

Consistent with the Committee's recommendation that DVA explore potential legislative action to curb harmful and deceptive business practices in the commercial advocacy sector – which was agreed by Government – public consultation is now underway on options to better protect veterans.

We are also working closely with the Institute of Veterans Advocacy, which has been established as the national professional association for veterans' advocates and to set competency and training standards for the sector.

I am pleased to note the IVA recently announced it is accepting membership applications.

I thank the Committee and I look forward to your questions.