

OPENING STATEMENT
SECRETARY LIZ COSSON AM, CSC
BUDGET ESTIMATES 2020-21
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE LEGISLATION
COMMITTEE
26 OCTOBER 2020
MAIN COMMITTEE ROOM, PARLIAMENT HOUSE
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Thank you Chair. I would like to update the Committee on significant developments since our appearance in March.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all staff of the Department for their efforts maintaining services to veterans and families, continuing with our transformation program and adapting to new ways of working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of our ex-service organisations and particularly the advocate community, for their ongoing patience during this challenging time and their commitment to our veteran community.

COVID-19

During COVID we have continued to deliver to veterans and their families and reach out to the most vulnerable in our veteran community; released special e-news bulletins; sent SMS text messages; maintained communications with ex-service organisations and wrote to GPs regarding telehealth services and to pharmacists.

We were also able to contact those residing in designated COVID “hot spots” to offer support.

Open Arms offices remained open with phone counselling available 24/7 and the website remained an important source of self-help, including COVID-specific resources.

We also commemorated the service and sacrifice of Australians in defence of our nation. Anzac Day 2020 saw historic domestic participation in a range of community commemorations. Also a COVID safe nationally televised service to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. There has also been almost 6,000 registrations for the WWII Commemorative Medallion and Certificate of Commemoration.

Veteran Centric Reform – Transformation

We continue to transform through our Veteran Centric Reform program.

We continue to partner with Defence to know veterans and their families when they enlist, during their service and before they transition.

The number of veterans who have registered through our online channel MyService, and the number of claims lodged, continues to increase.

The introduction of the Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant, including the Veteran Card and Lapel Pin, has also helped us identify and connect with more veterans. And the new question regarding ADF service in the 2021 Census will help identify more veterans.

We continued to consolidate our telephone lines and launched 1800 VETERAN.

Claims Processing

We have made it easier for veterans and families to connect with us, resulting in an unprecedented increase in claims received and on hand.

Although we have made incredible productivity gains this year, particularly during COVID and we have increased the number of claims we have finalised, keeping up with the demand and processing claims as quickly as we would like remains a challenge. I acknowledge that some are waiting for long periods for their claims to be finalised.

Budget 2020-21 and Interim Response to the Productivity Commission's Final Report

\$34.8 million (\$11.6 million mini Budget in June 2020, \$23.2 million in the October Budget) in additional funding has been provided to DVA to assist with claims processing.

DVA received funding through the 2020-21 Budget to provide targeted support for the mental health and wellbeing of veterans and their families, and deliver the right support and services for those transitioning to civilian life and supporting them into meaningful employment.

As part of the Budget, the Government also delivered the interim response to the Productivity Commission's report, *A Better Way to Support Veterans*.

The PC's report is wide-ranging and complex and Government will continue to consult with the veteran community to consider and address the remaining recommendations as part of the final response in the 2021-22 Budget.

Turning to other developments in the portfolio.

National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention

The Department welcomes the appointment of the interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention, Dr Bernadette Boss. I am committed to supporting her important work to improve suicide prevention efforts, including through the independent review of past Defence and veteran suicides.

Veteran Family Advocate

I have welcomed the new Veterans' Family Advocate, Ms Gwen Cherne who will directly engage with the families of veterans and help bring their perspectives to the heart of veteran policy and decision-making and also work closely with the National Commissioner.

I look forward to further updating the Committee on progress with other key initiatives including, Psychiatric Assistance dogs, Veteran Wellbeing Centres, the Veterans' Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and National Action Plan and the DVA Family and Domestic Violence Strategy 2020-25.

Thank you Chair. Attached to this statement are some facts and figures for the Committee and I welcome questions. ENDS

Facts & Figures (at 30 September 2020)**COVID-19**

Total amount of COVID-19 economic support payments to DVA clients	Over \$340 million
Number of DVA clients who received economic support payments	March 2020 - 225,000 July 2020 – 220,000
Number of DVA dependants who receive education support also received the fortnightly \$550 Coronavirus Supplement	1,300
Number of DVA telehealth, medical and specialist health care services delivered from March to May 2020	144,000
Number of letters sent to vulnerable DVA veterans (April 2020)	70,000
Number of letters to GP's (April 2020)	18,500
Number of DVA aged care providers	2,500
Text messages sent to DVA clients (April 2020)	27,000
Number of letters sent to DVA clients about mental wellbeing during and after COVID-19	30,000
Number of letters to GP's about mental wellbeing during and after COVID-19 (July 2020)	15,500
Number of letters to pharmacists	9,000
Members of the veteran community reached through special e-news bulletins	150,000
“Safe Zone” anonymous counselling line call	123
Percentage of DVA staff that participated in remote work during	Up to 90 percent

the pandemic	
Percentage of DVA staff currently working remotely on any given day	54 percent

Budget 2020-21

Increase fees paid by DVA to mental health, social work and community nursing providers, fee simplification and fund psychiatric training places	\$94.3 million
Expand Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling	\$5.0 million
Expand eligibility of the Coordinated Veterans’ Care Program to certain White Card holders	\$2.4 million
Supplementary funding to support DVA’s resourcing	\$64.1 million
Additional support for Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Veterans,	\$25.9 million
Broaden the Prime Minister’s Veterans’ Employment Program	\$6.0 million
Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War.	\$1.1 million

Veteran Centric Reform – Putting Veterans and their Families First

Welcome emails sent from DVA to new enlisted ADF members	20,400
New registrations to DVA from current-serving members processed through the Early Engagement Model	28,400
Bases with DVA Veteran Support Officers	56
Number of veterans with a MyService account	169,700
Number of claims lodged through MyService	127,800
Users of the new DVA website per month	195,000

Number of telephone lines consolidated	179 to 14
Veteran files digitised	393,000 (80 million pages)

Respect and Recognition

Number of Veterans' Recognition Package applications	104,000
Number of business providing offers (nationwide) to Veteran Card Holders	800
Registrations for WWII Commemorative Medallion	5,800

Claims Processing (at 30 Jun 20)

Covers the four contemporary streams: MRCA liability and permanent impairment; DRCA liability and permanent impairment; VEA Disability support; and VEA War Widow/ers and dependants.

Gross claims received	106,040
Increase in gross claims received from 2018-19 to 2019-20	13,603 (14.7 per cent)
Increase in gross claims received from 2017-18 to 2018-19	41,829 (82.7 per cent)
Increase in gross claims received from 2017-18 to 2019-20 (2 year total)	55,432 (109.5 per cent)
Conditions determined	89,308
Increase in conditions determined from 2018-19 to 2019-20	8,831 (11.0 per cent)
Increase in conditions determined from 2017-18 to 2018-19	24,525 (43.8 per cent)
Increase in conditions determined from 2017-18 to 2019-20 (2 year total)	33,356 (59.6 per cent)
Conditions accepted	64,841

Proportion of conditions accepted	72.6 per cent
Increase in conditions accepted from previous year	7,616 (13.3 per cent)
Claims remaining on hand at 30 June 2020	44,350
Increase in claims on hand from 30 June 2019	18,854 (73.9 per cent)
Percentage of claims decided within target timeframe	32.7 per cent

DVA support for veterans and their families impacted by bushfires

Clients living in the affected Local Government Areas	54,248
Clients at risk who are managed within the Client Support Framework	121
Telephone reach out calls	Reach out calls to 66 individuals 4,666 emails, and 7,897 SMS messages
Outreach Program Counsellors (OPCs) who were located in affected regions, to offer support and identify actions required to minimise interruption of client service delivery contact by Open Arms.	112
Number of VHC Service Providers in identified regions seeking to identify clients that had services missed due to fires.	96
Community Nursing providers in bushfire affected areas contacted	202 161 (responses received)
As at 31 January 2020, number of DVA clients resided in aged care facilities in bushfire affected areas.	1,800 DVA clients