

## **Opening Statement Senate Estimates Oct 2017**

I would like to acknowledge the recent tabling of the Government response to the Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Senate Committee Report into 'The Constant Battle - Suicide by Veterans'. I want to assure this Committee that the Department of Veterans' Affairs is committed to implementing the recommendations of this report, together with the recommendations from the review into the circumstances surrounding the tragic suicide death of Jesse Bird and the recommendations from the National Mental Health Commission review of Suicide and Self-Harm in our serving and ex-serving communities.

On behalf of the Department I would like to apologise to Mr & Mrs Bird and their family about the Department's policies and processes that didn't support Jesse and any role those failures had in Jesse's untimely death.

As the Committee reported, any death by suicide is tragic and our aspirational target rate should be zero. However, it is misleading to represent that any recommendations will achieve this goal but as I have outlined in recent hearings, DVA understands that we need to change and we need to transform our Department. We are committed to implementing the recommendations and to continue to progress our transformation through the Veteran Centric Reform program.

The 2017-18 Budget announced the funding of several measures in response to the National Mental Health Commission's recommendations. It also announced funding for the first phase of our Veteran Centric Reform which is a necessary and important evolution of the DVA service offering to veterans and their families. It is about knowing our veteran community, which extends to those who are still in service, those who have served, their families and dependants. This budget underpins a comprehensive year of reform activity for the Department. This investment, and ongoing investment, is essential to ensure our staff can deliver the support and services to our veteran community.

The Government yesterday announced a further \$31m for the Department to respond to some of the key recommendations of the Senate Inquiry tabled yesterday and in response to the joint Defence and DVA report into the handling of Jesse Birds' case. The package includes: a new payment for financially vulnerable veterans; an annual health check for veterans for the first five years after discharge; extended support for families; and the piloting of a case management service for transitioning or discharged veterans.

With our partners in Defence, the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation and Health, DVA is exploring all opportunities to reduce the challenges veterans and their families face during transition and identify those where intervention may reduce the risk of self-harm and suicide. DVA recognises it is essential we look at reducing the risks and increasing protection.

DVA is continuing to deliver a wide range of support and services to veterans and their families and we would be happy to address any questions that you have for us tonight.