



The Hon Dan Tehan MP

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Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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MS17-000879

24 OCT 2017

Senator the Hon Stephen Parry
President of the Senate
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr President

Stephen,

Pursuant to standing order 166, relating to the presentation of documents when the Senate is not sitting, I present to you the Australian Government Response to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee report into suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel, *The Constant Battle: Suicide by Veterans*.

Yours sincerely

DAN TEHAN
Encl



Australian Government

**Australian Government Response to the
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Report**

The Constant Battle: Suicide by Veterans

October 2017

PREFACE

The Government welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Senate Inquiry Report, *The Constant Battle: Suicide by Veterans*, and acknowledges the work and recommendations of the members of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee in conducting this Inquiry.

The Government would also like to thank the individuals and organisations who made submissions or gave evidence to the inquiry for their contribution to this important issue. Their evidence has helped to shape this report and adds to the Government's understanding of how we can further serve and support veterans and their families.

This Government Response sets out the Government's view on the 24 recommendations made in the Report and indicates how the Government intends to address the important task of supporting mental health of current and former Australian Defence Force (ADF) members. The Government overwhelmingly supports the views of the Committee, and has agreed to 22 of the Committee's recommendations and agreed in principle to two recommendations.

Suicide in the serving and ex-service community

Suicide is an issue that affects all Australians. It is the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15 to 44, with around 8 people dying by suicide a day. Current and former members of the ADF, and their families, are not immune to this.

Suicide prevention and support to those families who have been affected by the tragedy of suicide is a very high priority for the Australian Government. This is why in August 2016, the Government tasked the National Mental Health Commission (NMHC) to specifically look at suicide prevention services for current and former members of the ADF, and their families.

Running concurrently to the Senate Inquiry's investigations, the NMHC found that suicide is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted service response to ensure veterans have access to the support they need, at the right time. As a result, the Government has committed to action in four key areas to help prevent suicide among Australia's current and former serving personnel and their families:

1. Improving suicide prevention and mental health support for current serving ADF members, veterans and their families;
2. Improving the transition process for ADF members moving from military life into post-service civilian life and provide targeted support to families;
3. Improving family support through engagement of families and family sensitive practice; and
4. Transforming the Department of Veterans' Affairs systems, processes and organisational culture to better respond to the needs of Australia's veterans and their families.

In considering the findings and recommendations of the Senate Inquiry Report, the Government has committed to continued and further action across each of these four target areas.

The Government is also committing \$31 million to a package of five new initiatives that will further support the mental health of current and ADF members, and their families. These measures include:

- \$16.1 million over four years for a new Veteran Payment for veterans with mental health conditions;
- \$7.1 million over four years to extend support for families of veterans;
- \$2.1 million over four years for an annual health assessment for ex-serving ADF members for the first five years post-discharge;
- \$4.0 million over two years to pilot a case management service for transitioning or recently discharged ADF members; and
- \$1.7 million over two years to undertake a scoping study to professionalise veterans' advocacy.

Improving suicide prevention and mental health support

The Government will continue its efforts to develop and implement specific suicide prevention programs targeted at those veterans identified in at risk groups and is already implementing new suicide prevention initiatives that target at risk groups.

In direct response to this Inquiry, the Government will provide \$4.0 million over two years to pilot a personalised and veteran-centric case management service for at risk veterans who may require additional support immediately following their discharge from the military. This initiative will pilot providing veterans identified in at risk groups with a case manager, who will identify and facilitate access to medical, social and employment support, and assist ADF members to make a successful transition into civilian life.

The Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs have also committed to continue strengthening their existing suicide prevention strategies by identifying at risk populations and building protective factors around them.

A pillar of the Government's efforts in improving suicide prevention is ensuring that serving and ex-serving ADF members have access to targeted and timely mental health treatment. An extensive service system exists to support serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families. Help is available and can make a difference.

The expansions to the non-liability health care program over recent years, and the most recent expansion in the 2017-18 Budget whereby anyone who has served at least one day in the full-time ADF can access free treatment for any mental health condition, have greatly improved access to mental health treatment for ex-serving members.

This change has fundamentally altered the way in which current and former members of the ADF are provided with mental health support as they can now access free and immediate treatment, without a requirement to prove that their mental health condition was caused by their service.

Building on this program further, the Government is currently implementing an initiative that will provide a Department of Veterans' Affairs White Card to discharging personnel so they can access mental health treatment when they feel that they need it, any time in their civilian life.

As noted by the Committee, this initiative will strengthen the pathway to care for ADF members as they transition and throughout civilian life. It will also provide a means by which the Department of Veterans' Affairs can rapidly provide support to the veteran population.

In addition, the Government has asked the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Department of Defence and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to work together to maintain the dataset on the incidence of suicide among current and ex-serving ADF personnel, as recommended by the Committee. This ongoing data collection and research will continue to improve our understanding of this complex issue.

Improving the transition process

The Government is committed to improving the transition process. Just as we prepare members of the ADF for their careers in the military, we should prepare them for civilian life. The Department of Defence supports transitioning members while they are still serving, and it is the role of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to support members following their discharge and into their civilian life.

The Government established the Transition Taskforce following the last election. This Taskforce is examining the transition process to identify barriers to successful transition and will provide options to address these barriers. As recommended by the Committee, the Government will expand the terms of reference for the Taskforce to now consider additional topics that were highlighted through this Inquiry, such as gaps in support services, barriers to employment and opportunities to strengthen incentives to undertake work or study.

The Government is committing \$2.1 million over four years to enable transitioning ADF personnel to access an annual comprehensive mental and physical health assessment by a general practitioner for the first five years post their discharge. This will be complemented by the Government's initiative to provide all transitioning members with a DVA White Card.

The results from the AIHW study on the incidence of suicide among serving and ex-serving ADF members highlight the importance of the transition process, particularly for at risk groups. The Government is committed to making improvements to the transition process to deliver tailored support that meets the complex needs of some discharging members and provides targeted support to those who may be at risk.

In addition to the Government's commitment of \$4.0 million to pilot a case management service for at risk veterans who may require intensive support immediately following discharge, the Government is committing \$16.1 million over four years towards a new Veteran Payment for vulnerable veterans who have little or no financial support. This payment will provide financial support until their claims for liability for a mental health condition are determined.

Improving Family Support

The Government shares the Committee's views about the important role of family in supporting current and ex-serving ADF members and agrees that more support is needed for partners and families.

Families make a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of ADF members throughout their careers, through the transition process and when they become civilians. The role of family can be particularly important in the treatment and recovery of ill or injured individuals throughout their lifetime.

The Government has a range of initiatives already available to specifically support partners and families. Families of serving ADF members are able to access support and information through the Department of Defence.

In recognition of this, in the 2017-18 Budget the Government expanded the eligibility for the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) to include additional family members, including ex-partners. This has greatly improved accessibility to this community-based, military-aware mental health service.

To build on this existing support, the Government will provide \$7.1 million over four years to extend the support available to families of veterans. This additional support will include greater access to childcare, additional home care and counselling, and will help families to maintain their connections to community and employment, and improve social interaction.

The Government will also continue supporting the Female Veterans Forum and the Veterans' Families Forum, which provides a platform for female veterans and veteran family members to raise issues directly with the Government. The Government is committing to continued review of the support available to the partners of veterans through mechanisms like these Forums. Co-design will underpin the development of new support programs and initiatives to ensure they meet the needs of their intended recipients.

The Department of Defence is committed through Joint Health Command and Defence Community Organisation to strengthen and improve defence family engagement in the treatment and recovery of ill and injured personnel.

Work is also being undertaken within the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs to better promote and communicate the support programs available to families, in an effort to improve awareness levels and provide advice on how to access these programs.

Transforming the Department of Veterans' Affairs

The Government acknowledges the Committee's finding that many veterans have reported negative experiences with the Department, and that there is a pressing need to streamline administrative practices.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs exists to serve our veterans. That is why in this year's Budget, the Government provided \$166.6 million to implement the first stage of Veteran Centric Reform, which is the most comprehensive upgrade to the Department of Veterans' Affairs systems, processes and technology ever undertaken.

The Government will continue to support the Veteran Centric Reform agenda as it is implemented and welcomes a number of the Committee's recommendations, which seek to identify further opportunities to transform and streamline Department of Veterans' Affairs processes. These include a reference to the Productivity Commission, an audit of service delivery and a review of veteran advocacy.

In terms of responding to the recommendations, the following responses have been used throughout this document.

Response	Definition
Agreed	The Government agrees to the recommendation
Agreed in Principle	The Government agrees with the underlying principle of the recommendation, but has outlined an alternate approach to what has been recommended

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends, that in the context of recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare findings concerning veterans at risk of suicide, the Australian Government:

- develop and implement specific suicide prevention programs targeted at those veterans identified in at risk groups; and
- expand the DVA Reconnects Project to proactively contact veterans in these identified in at risk groups.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to continue to develop and implement specific suicide prevention programs targeted at those veterans identified in at risk groups and is already implementing new suicide prevention initiatives that target at risk groups.

Two new suicide prevention initiatives funded in the 2017-18 Budget will target vulnerable veterans experiencing mental health concerns.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs will pilot a coordinated care approach that provides intensive, wrap around support for veterans with complex mental health and social needs when they discharge from a mental health hospital.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs will also pilot the expansion of the successful Coordinated Veterans Care program to provide support to ex-serving members with chronic mental and physical conditions.

Additionally, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Department of Defence will continue to strengthen their existing suicide prevention strategies by identifying at risk populations and building protective factors around them.

The Government also acknowledges the past success of the DVA Reconnects Project in contacting veterans identified in at risk groups to ensure they are aware of the supports available to them. To improve identification and management of veterans in at risk groups, the Government is committing \$4.0 million over two years to pilot a personalised and veteran-centric case management service for at risk veterans who may require additional support immediately following their discharge from the military. This initiative will pilot providing veterans identified in at risk groups with a case manager, who will identify and facilitate access to medical, social and employment support and assist ADF members to make a successful transition into civilian life.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Australian Government commission an independent study into the mental health impacts of compensation claim assessment processes on veterans engaging with the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation. The results of this research should be utilised to improve compensation claim processes.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to commission an independent study into the mental health impacts of compensation claim assessment processes on veterans engaging with the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation.

The results of this study, together with the considerable amount of existing evidence gathered through the Veteran Centric Reform program, will inform further improvements to Department of Veterans' Affairs processes.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a National Veteran Suicide Register to be maintained by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government has committed an annual update to the results from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) study, *Incidence of suicide among serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel*. AIHW will continue to maintain this dataset and, out of respect for family members and the privacy of the veteran community, it will remain de-identified.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the Australian Government review the enhancement of veteran-specific online training programs intended for mental health professionals. In particular:

- requirements for providers to undertake training; and
- the introduction of incentives for undertaking online training and demonstrating outcomes in clinical practice.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to a review of professional development for mental health professionals treating veterans. This review will examine requirements and incentives for providers to undertake training, noting there are a number of existing training requirements for Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) clinicians, and for Department of Veterans' Affairs rehabilitation providers working with veterans.

The Government notes that all clinicians who provide services to VVCS clients, whether staff clinicians or outreach program providers, are supported by a detailed clinical practice policy and access to senior staff clinicians who provide case oversight. Clinicians undertake online training, including the *VVCS Practitioner's Guide*, and have access to additional military-centric resources and regular professional development opportunities through VVCS.

In addition to being Comcare accredited, all rehabilitation providers who wish to work with veterans must have:

- experience in working with ex-serving ADF members or other workers from a similar environment, such as police or emergency services personnel;
- experience in assisting clients with complex medical conditions to move to a new job with a new employer, to change careers and/or move into a new industry; and
- completed Department of Veterans' Affairs e-learning training courses demonstrating a knowledge of both military culture and the services available to veterans.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs align arrangements for the provision of professional mental health care.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees with the Committee that there should be seamless, quality mental health care provided to serving and ex-serving members of the ADF.

The Government will continue with its initiative to provide all transitioning members with a DVA White Card, which will ensure automatic access for the Government's new program of Non-Liability Health Care for all mental health conditions.

As part of the Government's focus on ensuring continuity of care from defence to civilian life, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Department of Defence are considering how to better align health care purchasing models through the Next Generation Health Service Project.

This Project will procure the next ADF Health Services supply arrangements and the next Agreement for Health Services between the single Services and Joint Health Command.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the Australian Government make a reference to the Productivity Commission to simplify the legislative framework of compensation and rehabilitation for service members and veterans. In particular, this review should examine the utilisation of Statements of Principle in the determination of compensation claims. The report of this systemic review should be completed within 18 months and tabled in the Parliament.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to make a reference to the Productivity Commission to review the legislative framework of compensation and rehabilitation for service members and veterans.

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to support the 'Veteran Centric Reform' program within the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government has demonstrated its commitment to Veteran Centric Reform by allocating first year funding of \$166.6 million in the 2017-18 Budget to support the commencement of this transformation program.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs will continue to transform the way in which it operates, to ensure a simpler and digitally enhanced experience for veterans and their families when interacting with the Department. Future funding to support this transformation program will be subject to Government consideration.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that, while the Veteran Centric Reform program is being implemented, the Australian Government continue to fund measures to:

- alleviate pressure on claims processing staff and to reduce the backlog of claims; and
- increase case coordination staff to assist clients with complex needs.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government provided \$13.5 million in the 2017-18 Budget to assist with claims processing, and work is already underway to alleviate pressure on claims processing staff and reduce the backlog of claims.

Additionally, under the Veteran Centric Reform program, significant progress will be made in reducing the administrative burden on claiming compensation online. It is anticipated that as this program of reform progresses and the claims process simplifies, the pressure on clients and staff will be eased. Work will continue on reducing the backlog of claims and simplifying the claims process.

In further support of this recommendation, the Government is committing \$4.0 million over two years to pilot a personalised and veteran-centric case management service for at risk veterans who may require additional support immediately following their discharge from the military.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that the Department of Veterans' Affairs conduct a review of its training program to ensure relevant staff:

- have an understanding of the realities of military service;
- have an understanding of health issues of veterans;
- have appropriate communication skills to engage with clients with mental health conditions; and
- have sufficient training to interpret medical assessment and reports.

Government Response: Agreed

The Department of Veterans' Affairs has an extensive suite of training programs, both face to face and online, that assist staff to understand the military experience and the implications of this on veteran physical and mental health. These include and are not limited to:

- *It's why we are here* workshops;
- Rehabilitation online;
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training;
- Managing Challenging Behaviours; and
- Understanding the Military Experience.

The Government agrees to conduct a review of these training programs and investigate how the Department might better support staff, particularly those working directly with veterans.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Department of Veterans' Affairs review its use of medico-legal firms in relation to the assessment of the conditions of veterans. In particular, this review should confirm:

- assessments undertaken are appropriate to the conditions considered;
- that the medical professionals used have undertaken training on treating veterans and can demonstrate their expertise working amongst this client group; and
- the need for independent medical assessments where information is already available from the veteran's own doctor or treating specialist.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to review its use of medico-legal firms in relation to the assessment of the conditions of veterans.

It is Department of Veterans' Affairs protocol to always seek an assessment from the veteran's treating practitioner in the first instance. Medico-legal firms are only used in particular instances. For example, when the client does not have a treating specialist or the treating specialist is unable to provide the required information or provide it in a timely manner.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs will continue to work with medico-legal firms to ensure that assessments are appropriate and of quality.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends the Department of Veterans' Affairs expand its online engagement with younger veterans through social media to raise awareness regarding available support services.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to continue to use and expand its online engagement with younger veterans through social media to raise awareness regarding available support services.

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that the reference to the Productivity Commission should also include examination of the following areas in the Veterans' Affairs portfolio:

- governance arrangements;
- administrative processes; and
- service delivery.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees for the Productivity Commission to consider these areas. The Terms of Reference for the Review will be finalised by the Treasurer and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Australian National Audit Office commence the proposed performance audit of the 'Efficiency of veterans' service delivery by the Department of Veterans' Affairs' as soon as possible.

Government Response: Agreed

The Australian National Audit Office has advised that the Auditor-General has included a potential audit, "Efficiency of veterans' service delivery by the Department of Veterans' Affairs" in his 2017-18 Annual Audit Work Program. The scope and timing of the proposed audit is a matter for the Auditor-General.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs is ready to assist the Australian National Audit Office with their enquiries.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends that the Transition Taskforce examine and address:

- any gaps in medical services or income support for veterans in transition or immediately following transition;
- barriers to employment for veterans who are transitioning such as workers' insurance issues and civilian recognition of qualifications, skills and training; and
- disincentives for veterans to undertake work or study resulting from the legislative or policy frameworks of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to expand the terms of reference for the Transition Taskforce to include an examination of:

- any gaps in medical services or income support for veterans in transition or immediately following transition;
- barriers to employment for veterans who are transitioning such as workers' insurance issues and civilian recognition of qualifications, skills and training; and
- disincentives for veterans to undertake work or study resulting from the legislative or policy frameworks of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Recommendation 15

The committee recommends that the Department of Veterans' Affairs develop a two-track transition program for serving members leaving the ADF. Those identified as being in 'at risk' groups or requiring additional assistance due to their circumstances should be able to access intensive transition services. These intensive transition services should include additional support for:

- claims case management;
- healthcare, mental health and wellbeing support;
- employment assistance programs;
- social connectedness programs; and
- health and wellbeing programs.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees with the Committee that serving ADF members who are 'at risk' should be offered more intensive transition support services.

The Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs have a responsibility to support those 'at risk' throughout the transition period. The Department of Defence supports 'at risk' members from the time they are identified for separation, and it is the role of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to support members following their discharge and into their civilian life.

The Government notes there are a number of pilot projects currently underway or planned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Department of Defence that will inform the design of more intensive transition support services. For example, the Department of Veterans'

Affairs is working closely with the Department of Defence to enhance the transition experience of Special Forces members. This project will pilot a transition assistance program for Special Forces personnel that, if successful, could be expanded to all ADF members.

Additionally, the Government's commitment of \$4.0 million over two years to pilot a case management service for at risk veterans who may require intensive support immediately following discharge, will further inform the design of future transition support services.

To further enhance the transition support available to all transitioning members, including those identified in at risk groups, the Government is committing \$2.1 million over four years to enable transitioning ADF personnel to access an annual comprehensive mental and physical health assessment by a general practitioner for the first five years post their discharge. This initiative will increase the early detection and intervention of mental and physical health concerns during a time that can be a risk period for the emergence of mental health conditions and increased risk of suicide.

The Government is also introducing a new Veteran Payment to provide vulnerable veterans, who have little or no financial support, with financial assistance until their claims for liability for a mental health condition are determined. In addition to providing this at risk group with financial support, this payment will also ensure vulnerable veterans have access to vocational and/or psychosocial rehabilitation and financial counselling. The Government is committing \$16.1 million over four years to this new initiative.

Recommendation 16

The committee recommends the Australian Government issue all ADF members transitioning into civilian life with a DVA White Card.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government is currently implementing an initiative that will provide a Department of Veterans' Affairs White Card for mental health treatment to all ADF members as they transition into civilian life. The Government anticipates this initiative will be fully implemented by the end of the 2017-18 financial year.

Recommendation 17

The committee recommends that the Career Transition Assistance Scheme include an option for veterans to undertake a period of work experience with an outside employer.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees with the Committee that paid work experience with outside employers is an important opportunity for serving ADF members to prepare them for the transition to civilian life.

The Career Transition Assistance Scheme already provides options for current serving ADF members to undertake a period of work experience with an outside employer or attend career transition activities, including job interviews, appointments and on-the-job experience. The period of paid leave available to serving members is determined by their length of service and discharge circumstances. Serving ADF members and veterans can access the scheme 12 months before and up to 12 months after transition.

The Department of Defence is undertaking a review of the Career Transition Assistance Scheme to better address the needs of all transitioning ADF members, including at risk groups. This review will examine the period of paid work experience with an outside employer. It is expected that this review will be completed in early 2018.

Recommendation 18

The committee recommends that the Australian Public Service Commission conduct a review into mechanisms to further support veteran employment in the Australian Public Service and the public sector.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees with the Committee that the skills and experience of ADF members mean they are often well suited to other public sector careers following their military career.

The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) has recently reviewed its mechanisms to support veterans' employment, which has resulted in several initiatives aimed at increasing the participation of veterans in public sector employment. These include the development of:

- a website containing information specific to veterans seeking employment in the Australian Public Service (APS);
- a guide that aligns ADF ranks to APS classifications; and
- a practical toolkit to guide veterans through the process of applying for an APS job.

The APSC will continue to explore initiatives to promote better outcomes for veterans' employment in the APS.

Recommendation 19

The committee recommends that the Department of Veterans' Affairs review the support for partners of veterans to identify further avenues for assistance. This review should include services such as information and advice, counselling, peer support and options for family respite care to support partners of veterans.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to continue to review the support available to the partners of veterans through forums such as the Female Veterans Forum and the Veterans' Families Forum, in an effort to identify avenues for further assistance.

The Government also notes there are a number of initiatives currently underway in the Department of Veterans' Affairs to review the support available to families and ensure it continues to meet their needs. The Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) continues to draw on the lived experience of its National Advisory Committee and work with key stakeholders, such as the Partners of Veterans Association, to identify service gaps and how its services may be further tailored to better support the families of current serving and ex-serving ADF members.

In addition to this continued consultation and review, the Government will provide \$7.1 million over four years to extend the support available to families of veterans. This additional support will include greater access to childcare, additional home care and counselling, and will help families to maintain their connections to the community and employment, and improve social interaction.

Recommendation 20

The committee recommends:

- the Australian Government expand the Veterans and Community Grants program to support the provision of alternative therapies to veterans with mental health conditions; and
- the Department of Veterans' Affairs consult with ex-service organisations and the veteran community regarding avenues to reform the Veterans and Community Grants program to support the provision of alternative therapies to veterans.

Government Response: Agreed in Principle

The Government agrees to examine funding options for the ex-service community to support alternative therapies and wellbeing activities through a strategic review of the Department of Veterans' Affairs grants programs.

As part of this review, the Department of Veterans' Affairs will consult the ex-service community with expertise in this area and health professionals regarding avenues to support alternative therapies for veterans.

Recommendation 21

The committee recommends the Australian Government fund a trial program that would provide assistance animals for veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) stemming from their military service in order to gather research to support the eventual funding of animals for veterans with PTSD and/or other mental health conditions through the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Government Response: Agreed

As announced by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs on 14 September 2017, the Department of Veterans' Affairs has commenced planning for a trial that will assess the health outcomes of providing psychiatric assistance dogs to veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The trial, together with international research currently underway, will inform future policy considerations regarding providing veterans with PTSD and/or other mental health conditions with psychiatric assistance animals.

Recommendation 22

The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide funding to support the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service:

- create and maintain a public database of services available to veterans; and
- provide an information service to assist veterans and families connect and access appropriate services provided by ex-service organisations and others.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees with the Committee that a single website and information service can help to build awareness of the support available and link veterans with local services.

To this end, in August 2017, the Government launched the Engage '*Supporting those who Serve*' website. Hosted by the Department of Defence, Engage provides easy, intuitive access to a broad range of information, support and services available to current and ex-serving ADF members, their families and/or those involved in their support. It also assists ADF members and their families navigate a broad range of information, support and services from Government agencies, ex-service organisations, not-for-profit service providers and charities.

In support of the Committee's recommendation, the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) will continue to raise awareness of the Engage website and establish a direct link to Engage on the VVCS website. Augmenting this, VVCS is piloting a Community Coordination Team in the Townsville region. As part of this pilot, VVCS will trial an online veteran hub to both support recovery and connect the ADF community to the Engage website.

Recommendation 23

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a Bureau of Veterans' Advocates to represent veterans, commission legal representation where required, train advocates for veterans and be responsible for advocate insurance issues.

Government Response: Agreed in Principle

The Government supports veteran advocacy and agrees with the Committee that the current advocacy system needs further review.

The Government will provide \$1.7 million over two years to undertake a scoping study on the possible operational models for professionalising veterans' advocacy services. The Government agrees to consider the Committee's recommendation for a Bureau of Veterans' Advocates alongside other advocacy models, including those put forward by ex-service organisations through this scoping study, and will consult the veteran community about future directions in veteran advocacy.

Recommendation 24

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish an independent review of the representation of veterans before the Veterans' Review Board. This review should assess whether the rights of vulnerable veterans are being adequately protected and whether further support mechanisms for veterans appearing before the Veterans' Review Board are required.

Government Response: Agreed

The Government agrees to conduct an independent review of the representation of veterans before the Veterans' Review Board.