



THE VIETNAM VETERANS' FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA Inc. NATIONAL HEAD OFFICE

8 Mary Street, Granville NSW 2142 (P.O. Box 170)

NATIONAL PRESIDENT: W ROBERTS OAM JP - NATIONAL SECRETARY: R O'CONNOR JP

Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

7 October 2020

SUBMISSION

Re: National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill 2020 and the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2020.

The Vietnam Veterans' Federation of Australia (VVFA) thanks the Committee for the opportunity of expressing its views/comments on this very important and significant Bill which was introduced to Parliament on 27 August 2020.

We are aware from the media release of 30 September 2020, from the office of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, The Hon. Darren Chester MP, that Dr Bernadette Boss CSC, has been appointed as the Interim National Commissioner and we congratulate her on this most important appointment. We also wish her well and every success during her tenure.

It has taken a long time to get to this stage, and after many years of agitating by Ex-Service Organisations (ESO's), we are hopeful that the intent and consequences of the Bill will help former and current members (Veterans) of the Defence Forces, their families and the general public, to have a better understanding as to why, or what may have led to or caused these suicides, and what is likely to be undertaken and implemented by the Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to prevent or significantly reduce the future risks of suicide in our Defence Forces.

The Federation, and no doubt other ESO's, applauds the Government's introduction of the Bill to establish the National Commissioner to inquire into the factors or systemic issues contributing to these deaths by suicide and to recommend appropriate action/strategies to support the prevention of future deaths by suicides. This at least shows that the Government is now very mindful of the emotional and psychological problems and the lack of recognition and early treatment of this problem that has, for whatever reasons, befallen many of those who had, or are currently serving in the Defence Force and may have led to, or are contemplating, the taking of their own lives. It is hoped that any recommendations from the National Commissioner's Office will be considered expediently and implemented swiftly.

Having read through the Bill, we are reasonably satisfied that the legal, investigative tools, compliances and administrative requirements of the National Commissioner and Office, as detailed are, in our opinion, adequately covered in the Bill that would allow that Office to effectively perform the functions and purposes for which it was established as a permanent statutory office holder within with the AGD.

We have no doubts that following the commencement of the National Commissioner's functions, there will be issues raised from time to time that were not previously considered or thought of, which may impede or affect the ability of the Commissioner's Office to fully undertake the functions for which it was established.

We are confident that should the Commissioner's Office be confronted with any unexpected impediments or operational issues that would prevent it from effectively undertaking its functions, that the Government will

ensure that the necessary amendments to the Bill is enacted or that funding and appropriate resources (e.g. staffing) are immediately made available to address these issues. To do otherwise would defeat the purpose of the Bill.


Whilst we note that \$42.7 million has been provided over five years to support the establishment and operation of the National Commissioner's functions, we assume that we can still be confident that the Government will definitely provide additional funding should this money be expended prior to the expiration of the five year period, or to employ additional qualified staff to assist the Commissioner if this need arises during that period, or for any other periods in the future when the National Commissioner's Office is in operation, for that matter.

The following comments/views have also been received from some of our Federation members:

- The National Commissioner will be dealing with vulnerable individuals and there needs to be due respect and tangible recognition and acknowledgement of those feelings. This could be achieved by having a professional representative present from Open Arms, allow a legal representative or another person with whom they are comfortable with, to brief and support those appearing before the Commissioner and that the representatives also be compensated accordingly for their attendance.
- It is understood that the National Commissioner will report to government, and DVA/Defence will be responsible for the implementation of any recommendations put forward by the Commissioner. The departments should be required to meet strict timelines when considering and implementing the National Commissioner's recommendations, and there should be a requirement to respond within six months with a clear implementation plan for those recommendations or clear reasons for not doing so.
- AGD should provide a breakdown of the budget estimate for the Office of the National Commissioner. This would give all parties a better idea of how the Office will achieve its required functions/operations and outcomes.
- It is also hoped that the circumstances leading to the deaths by suicide of Garry McColley and Jesse Bird will be looked at very closely by the National Commissioner. We have concerns that there are a number of former and current members of the Defence Force who may be contemplating self-harm as they too, may be facing similar situations that led to Garry and Jesse taking their own lives.

Once again, we commend and applaud the Government for introducing this Bill to establish the National Commissioner's Office and hope that it achieves the purposes for which it was created, and that it will instill confidence in our servicemen and women, both current and former, in the knowledge that the Government, Defence and DVA will support them in their time of need and to ensure their wellbeing well into the future.

Only time will tell how successful this Bill and the establishment of the National Commissioner's Office will be in preventing or substantially reducing the risk of veterans' suicides. We can only hope that this is a positive step in the right direction. We owe our "Veterans" at least this much for their service to a grateful nation.

 William (Bill) Roberts OAM, JP
National President

Cc: The Hon Darren Chester MP - Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Liz Cosson AM CSC – Secretary, Department of Veterans' Affairs