

"The Forgotten Diggers"

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Dear Editor,

Firstly I thank Mr Carlyon and Ms Lamperd for providing the public with a story that has been hidden for many years. I was moved by your story today on the fate of former soldier Aaron Wiles, about his pain not only as a result of his service but that which was caused by bureaucratic layering of Military Compensation & Rehabilitation Scheme [MCRS], in other words the treatment of this Government to him for injuring himself whilst training to be a soldier, which led to him taking his own life.

The Australian Peacekeeper & Peacemaker Veterans' Association [APPVA] has been dealing with the Primary, Review and Appeal Levels for thousands of current and former serving ADF personnel, including a number of different Compensation and Superannuation Acts for over 15 years. We do this as a free service and it is mainly volunteer based – volunteers who themselves have "been through the DVA ringer".

We have noted that the efforts of the Department of Veterans' Affairs [DVA] progression of fixing matters or problems over the past 15 years, such as payment of bills under MCRS, has been continuously highlighted – and it doesn't get fixed.

At the moment, DVA Claims Delegates with reduced staffing levels across Australia, have substantially increased workloads – are having difficulty in coping with the strain. The APPVA warned DVA some years ago about Staff Reductions and the effects that it will have on the delivery of Compensation Entitlements to our veterans – particularly in an era of increased deployment of the ADF on Operations overseas. The case of Aaron Wiles is one of very many. It is not a case of slipping through the cracks; it is as real as a slap in the face. The problem with billing to doctors, specialists, pharmaceuticals have been ongoing and continue. The DVA bureaucracy is heart-breaking for those needing immediate help in getting their claims settled.

Our veterans are expected to hand out in some cases hundreds of dollars that they do not have for up-front payments, because the bureaucratic processes within DVA is far too slow and antiquated to deal with the growing young veteran generation, their needs, their health, their well-being and quality of life. DVA needs significant improvements to technology in bill paying systems – if HICAPS is able to provide immediate payment for 36 Australian Health Funds to over 40,000 Health Care providers; why can't DVA devise a similar system or piggy back this system? The pain of our disabled ADF veterans would quickly dissipate and they can focus on their quality of life, for not only themselves, but for their family's sake.

Whilst there will be those who will provide good news stories about how they have been treated by DVA, there are far too many that we deal with on a daily basis that have been poorly managed by DVA, outside of the ADF.

In the US, the Veterans' Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki has been highly criticised by 250,000 US Veterans from the Middle East War as they complain that they are waiting up to 12 months for their compensation. We are seeing cases in Australia, which is taking from 6 months to 7 years. This is not acceptable. The Government is simply not prepared for a Post Cold War Veteran clientele; particularly those who have been returning from a range of Operations, including Peacekeeping Operations from 1989 to the present day. The Last Decade has seen this nation's highest tempo in military commitment to Global peace and security operations since World War II, which continues.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs have not forecasted for up to an estimated 1,000,000 eligible current and ex-serving clients who have served in the Australian Defence Force as Permanent, Reserves, and Cadets since the 1970's. A large number of these for service people are potentially eligible for MCRS, the same Legislative Act that Aaron Wiles had nothing but total frustration, leading to his death.

Instead, in 2006-2007, they planned and forecasted on the declining WWII veteran and War Widow Population as their justification to reduce staffing levels and services. There has been no vision by the Department on the complex nature of multiple-eligibility Legislation and the anticipated tsunami of those who will need extensive attention that have returned and continue to return from Afghanistan.

The Government has severely reduced the ability of the Ex-Service Organisations to assist veterans and their families with their complex entitlements. It is not as simple as it was for those veterans of World War II or Viet Nam. The current system is far less beneficial, difficult to negotiate and highly frustrating to those current and ex-serving Defence members who find it mind-blowing to comprehend the complexity of multiple eligibility, let alone a single Legislative Act.

As a result, due to Government funding cut-backs from \$4M to \$1.7M, we have lost three paid full time professionals that were providing a first class service and getting it right the first time. The Veteran community need these paid veteran entitlement Officers to provide a professional and caring service to those who are wounded, injured or ill in the service of their country. The result is further Government financial outlay to engage Solicitors and Barristers in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal [AAT] who act on behalf of frustrated diggers. This could be reduced from an estimated \$280M to simply increasing Grant Funding to Ex-Service Organisations [ESO] who engage in the battle every day. Increasing Funding and adequate training to ESO will negate the need to engage lawyers in the AAT. An investment that the Government should look into in terms of long term cost savings.

The current DVA system is groaning under the strain from the increased handling of several Commonwealth Veteran Compensation Acts, the lack of experienced staff to make the right decision the first time; along with lack of funding to provide ESO the resources that support these veterans of Australia. Funding needs to be Means and Assets tested for ESO, as there are a number of organisations that have several to hundreds of millions of dollars invested and still hold their hand out for more money.

The Federal Government is due to save hundreds of millions of dollars from the announced withdrawal last week of Australian Forces from Afghanistan. Those savings should be at least re-invested into a better service for those who have put their lives on the line for this country.

For Mrs Wiles, we are sorry to see your loss and understand Aaron's frustrations. We thank him for his years of service as a Reservist in the Medical Corps and for answering the call when the country needed him. He would have most certainly deployed to the Middle East.

Veterans, current serving ADF personnel are encouraged to seek the specialised Help of the **Veterans' and Veterans' Families Counselling Service [VVCS]**, who run a 24 –hour a day hotline and client service. VVCS is specifically tailored to meet the needs of veterans, their families and members of the ADF experiencing psychological and welfare problems.

Their number is 1800 011 046 Website:

http://www.dva.gov.au/health_and_wellbeing/health_programs/vvcs/Pages/index.aspx