



Soldier On Headquarters
Building 1, 80 Bellenden
St
GUNGAHLIN, ACT 2912
T 1300 620 380
ABN: 248 117 60786

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

On behalf of Soldier On, I thank you for the opportunity to provide the enclosed submission to the Inquiry into transition from the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Soldier On was founded in 2012, to provide support and services to contemporary veterans and to bring the need for greater support for contemporary veterans to the awareness of the wider community. Since our inception, we have grown dramatically and have matured into a professional service delivery organisation focused on supporting the men and women, and their families, who have served our nation. These services have particular focus on the transition continuum and beyond.

In addressing the Terms of Reference, we have sought to provide an honest view of the current landscape along with potential considerations moving forward.

We welcome any opportunity to discuss further with the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mat Jones", written over a white background.

Mat Jones
Deputy CEO
SOLDIER ON

Annexes:

- A. *What We Do* – Soldier On
- B. *Taking the Pledge* – Soldier On

Enclosure:

- 1. Soldier On Submission to the Committee





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SOLDIER ON SUBMISSION

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE (ADF)

INTRODUCTION

There has been significant improvement to the transition process for service personnel as they separate from the Australian Defence Force (ADF), over the past three-four years. The current focus on employment post transition, through targeted employment initiatives and programs provided by both government and external agencies, and greater access to mental health support through the expansion of Non-Liability Healthcare, have been positive steps forward. The transition process however is not just about these two, be it integral factors, nor should it just focus on the claims and pension process. Transition from service also includes social connections, community and most importantly, family. As the average period of service remains just over 7 years, veterans are much younger when they separate and there is so much life to live. A more holistic approach is needed to ensure that these men and women are set up for a successful transition to civilian life.

While the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) both indicated greater levels of collaboration between the two agencies in their latest Annual Reports, there is an ongoing need to work more collaboratively with external agencies as when individuals, and family, transition from the ADF, they do so into the community. Recent findings in the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study: Mental Health Prevalence* report indicates that the first 12 months after separation from the ADF are a critical time for one's mental health, particularly young men aged between 18-24. The transition process however is a much longer journey, and this was also reflected in the report. It also showed that not all that separate from ADF get or seek support from DVA, with only one in 10 individuals seeking, or are able to access, veteran healthcare services. This highlights the need for a holistic and tailored approach that can adapt to the diverse needs of all veterans.

Like many other external organisations, Soldier On has experienced barriers to provide greater support to ADF personnel while they are still serving or approaching the time for transition. We can see however, why this occurs with the myriad of organisations in Australia reporting they support veterans and families, many of which, like Soldier On, are relatively new in the space. While we are thankful for opportunities afforded to meet with senior leadership and officials, we would like to engage more broadly with both Departments and service personnel which will hopefully translate to increased support being offered to veterans and families at a local and individual level. Currently, these engagements are occurring at local levels or when we have individuals referred to us from the Departments.



There is no question that there is more to be done across the transition continuum. Soldier On would like to work more collaboratively and effectively with government to ensure that improvements continue to be made and that successful, long term transition is achieved.

Soldier On is a positive organisation that is focused on solutions and how we can better support those who have served our nation. We have an incredibly successful program that has been adjusted across the years to ensure that we are meeting the needs of those we support. In many areas, we are now working with Defence and DVA and delivering outcomes. We are working directly with various bases to provide employment and education support. In 2016, we became part of Garrison Health Services to ensure that we were trusted by ADF hierarchy as a provider of mental health support. We were accepted as a member of Mental Health Australia in 2018 and we have worked with units, such as the Army Adventure Training Wing, to deliver resilience programs to serving and ex-serving men and women across the country.

In addressing the Terms of Reference, we hope to provide possible, positive solutions for potential implementation in the future. If relationships between the Departments and ex-service organisations were to improve, and whole of government were to embrace a more collaborative approach to the ongoing support of the men and women who have served Australia, their transition experience will most certainly improve, along with their health and overall futures.

TERMS OF REFERENCE POINT 1: The barriers that prevent ESOs from effectively engaging with ADF members, the Department of Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs to provide more effective support to ADF Personnel as they transition out of service.

Who is responsible for transition?

Defence describes transition as 'a shared responsibility' for families, units and ADF support services. The shared responsibility however, extends beyond these groups. While DVA also have a large part to play in this process, with only 1 in ten individuals able to, or choosing to, access support from DVA¹, that responsibility needs to extend further. When an individual, and their family, separate from the ADF, they do so into the community. It is therefore beneficial for them to have access and support from external community based organisations that understand the complexity of service but are also connected to the greater community and can provide long term support for the transition to private, civilian life.

Transition is also not one fixed path for all that separate, and each case is different. While there has been significant and positive focus on employment post separation in the past 12 months, there is far more to transition, and it would be a mistake to solely focus on this area. Just as it would to focus solely on pensions and compensation, mental health support or social activities. It is the combination of all these areas, and likely more, that prevent an individual from shutting down and becoming isolated after they have transitioned from ADF.

¹ Health and Wellbeing Transition Study: Mental Health Prevalence

Furthermore, transition is not just an individual process. Transition impacts the whole family and all are required to adjust to a different way of living. It is imperative that support services are available to the entire family and that longevity of support is provided. While it is encouraging that both Defence and DVA are starting to focus on the next 12 months post transition, the process itself takes far longer. At Soldier On, we often see issues arise in our participants well after 12 months post transition.

Attempts made by Soldier On to work more closely with ADF members, Department of Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs

Soldier On was launched in April 2012. Since its inception, it has been the aim of Soldier On to work closely with serving and ex-serving members and to provide support that appeared to be missing for contemporary veterans. Initially, this was often through sporting or adventure activities that were creating awareness of the support needed for those who were wounded, injured or ill due to their service. Engagement with the services, particularly Army, was relatively positive but there was understandably some trepidation about a new organisation with a specific focus – the contemporary veteran and their family.

As Soldier On matured as an organisation, we expanded the services that we provide to offer direct support for mental health, social connection and sporting activities, and employment and education. We recognised that all who served, whether they identified as wounded, injured or ill, or not, deserve the opportunity to access some level of support both during and post service. There is often a perception that all who have served have some level of mental health condition, particularly PTSD. This is not the case. Help may still be required however, in other areas and new networks need to be developed, regardless of whether one has an identified condition.

From Soldier On's perspective, access to ADF members that are still in service has been on an ad hoc basis and is very dependent on the hierarchy of the day. As at 06 July 2018, Soldier On has access to nine bases across Australia, at varying levels, and can provide information directly to serving members about our services at these facilities. While attempts have been made to engage with senior leadership about providing more support and gaining approval to work more closely with serving members, we have seen greater success in local level engagements that are often based on personal relationships and experiences.

In February 2016, Soldier On presented the initial proposal for the Prime Minister's Veterans' Employment Initiative and again in June 2016. Later that month, the Prime Minister announced that he would be launching the initiative with Soldier On. Significant work went into the development of a collaborative framework between ESOs, industry and government for the initiative, including in depth consultation with industry leaders. Unfortunately, the decision was made that DVA would run the initiative and while Soldier On did consult, we were not ultimately involved in the launch and running of the initiative.

Also, in 2016, Soldier On presented a business case for the provision of transition services across the country, to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, with a recommended pilot period of 12 months in Canberra, Sydney, Albury and Melbourne. Again, this was aimed at developing a collaborative framework between ESOs, industry and government in the provision of transition services. The program took a more holistic approach to transition support, not just focusing on employment support, but also education, mental health services and social activities. No formal response was received from the Minister and Soldier On later withdrew the business case and continued to develop its own support program, which now has a proven track record and scalability (see Annex A – What We Do).

Why barriers are met by ESOs

In 2016, it was estimated that there are 3,500 organisations² providing some level of service to veterans and their families in Australia, with approximately 520 nominating veterans as the sole beneficiary. This does not include the number of for profit organisations that are now working in the employment space. It is therefore understandable that barriers exist when working with the Departments, due to the vast range of information and potential of miscommunication about organisations.

Soldier On understands that we are but one of many, who are presenting their programs and views on ways to improve support mechanisms for veterans and their families, particularly through the transition process. There are very few individuals, or organisations, who enjoy being told what is being done incorrectly and how said advisor can do a better job. While it was always Soldier On's intentions to work with the departments, intertwine with their current services, and provide ongoing support to those who were transitioning from service, as well as their families, we understood why there was reluctance to partner with any one organisation. It is for this reason, we ultimately withdrew our business case from consideration and focused on the ongoing development of our program. Soldier On now has a far more mature program, that is achieving fantastic results and support for not just the ADF, but the service community as a whole. We are working directly with nearly 100 industry leaders to ensure that service personnel and families are better understood, appropriate opportunities are provided, and the greater community can engage and support their transition to civilian life.

Why barriers need to be removed

The aged care, disability, indigenous, mental health, social services, family violence and child protection, young offenders, preventative and primary health sectors all rely on community-based services to 'wrap around' the client and appropriate family members, to deliver support, foster resilience, promote health and wellbeing and improve long term outcomes. There is no reason this cannot, and should not, occur within the veteran space.

Transition from service is not a short process. While it is encouraging to see more focus being placed on the initial 12 months out of service, as previously mentioned Soldier On's experience is

² Aspen Medical Foundation Report, 2016

that it is often past 12 months that individuals and families require greater support. The expectation that the Departments would continue to support individuals after this period, in all areas of transition, is unrealistic. Services provided by ESOs should not be seen as competition, or in place of, those provided by the departments. They should become an extension of the programs and support that are in place. The flexibility and agility of external organisations enables quick response and adjustment to support, as needed.

A network of service providers would best support the overall positive outcomes for transition for both the individual and the family. This would enable the provision of tailored approaches, create a wider network of support and increase community understanding and support.

TERMS OF REFERENCE POINT 2: The model of mental health care while in ADF service and through the transition period to the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Continuity of care providers

It is well documented that continuity of care from during service and the transition continuum, is imperative in supporting members as they separate from service. Greater focus however, is required for the continuity of *care providers* across the transition process. While this has been improved over recent years, particularly for those who are identified as J51/52 for medical separation through early intervention models between Defence and DVA, more adjustments need to be made for the broader veteran population. Particularly noting that only 1 in ten of those who separate access services through DVA³. It would be beneficial for health providers that are external to ADF to be engaged well before separation, so that services can continue uninterrupted once the individual has separated. This will be somewhat limited if the individual relocates, but should be a consideration in planning. A greater network of service providers across the country, would assist in minimising the impact for those who relocate and help to stop them from slipping through the cracks.

Evidence-based practice

Through this process of continuity of care it is important to ensure service providers are working from an evidence-base and providing appropriate treatment. Soldier On is often approached for comment on treatments that are not fully researched and tested. While these treatment methods are interesting to follow, for our organisation, we will always provide services and treatment that is evidence-based and seen as best practice within the mental health field.

Monitoring of this element appears to be improving based on anecdotal evidence as Defence contracted Mental Health Professionals (MHPs) are being more critical in the evaluation of external service providers. One of the major consequences of not providing evidence-based treatments is a lack of progress or positive outcomes, which reduces people's belief in treatment and recovery.

³ Health and Wellbeing Transition Study: Mental Health Prevalence

Trauma informed care and stepped care framework

The recent *Review into the Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention Service available to current and former serving ADF members and their families*, was guided by two key frameworks, stepped care and trauma informed care. Both frameworks are practiced at Soldier On. While this review was focused on suicide and self-harm, these principles apply to management of mental health more generally.

It is our recommendation that all organisations (including ADF and DVA) and service delivery should be trauma-informed and that these care principles should also be applied to the transition process, along with separation planning, to minimise risk of re-traumatisation or decompensation when individuals are at their most vulnerable.

One of the challenges for members is moving from the high level of scaffolding provided by ADF in terms of their health provision and support during service, which is often abruptly removed from the date of separation, particularly for those who do not transition to DVA healthcare, or for those who experience issues sometime after separation.

It is recommended that separation be seen through a stepped care framework, similar to the idea of step-down care when people move from inpatient to community care in the health sector.

Understanding Defence culture

It is highly recommended that service providers have knowledge of Defence culture and the veteran experience. Otherwise, services are less acceptable, and veterans are less likely to seek help or remain in treatment. This is evident in the high dropout rates of veterans regarding psychological treatment for PTSD.

In addition to this, the interventions need to be more holistic and consider psychosocial factors including engagement with family and community, as provided for by Soldier On. Our approach is to provide services that 'wrap around' the individual and family, focusing on various areas that help individuals to reconnect, either with their families or the greater community, and ultimately prevent isolation and deterioration of overall health.

TERMS OF REFERENCE POINT 3: The efficacy of whole of government support to facilitate the effective transition to employment in civilian life of men and women who have served in the ADF.

Being outside of whole of government it is hard to comment on this point. From Soldier On's perspective however, there is more that can be done here. We are being approached by several public service departments who are now looking to sign the Soldier On Pledge (explained in Point 4 response) and work with us in supporting the transition of ADF personnel and their spouses, into employment.

There appear to be multiple initiatives across the states and this has only increased since the implementation of the Prime Minister's Initiative and the current focus on veteran employment.

The space remains fractured and confusing for not only those transitioning and looking for work, but for the Departments who are looking to engage with veterans and families. We believe this is why we are increasingly being asked to support state government initiatives and individual departments, just as we are supporting private industry.

TERMS OF REFERENCE POINT 4: Any related matters.

At Soldier On, we have developed a holistic service delivery model, that aims to 'wrap around' the individual and their family, as they transition from ADF, and preferably before this transition occurs. We believe that early intervention and upstream support is the most positive approach when supporting the veteran community and are working to engage with individuals and families, sooner during their service.

We have developed the HELP principle that focuses on the following areas:

- **H** Health and Wellbeing – Psychology, social and sporting activities and programs and service initiatives
- **E** Employment – transition services, employment support (including post placement support), career development assistance
- **L** Learning – Education and training programs, vocational training
- **P** Participation – Social activities and programs focused on connections with family, friends and the broader community, volunteering and sports programs

We are providing these services face to face across the country in Canberra, Concord NSW, Albury NSW, Newcastle NSW, Parkville VIC, Adelaide SA, Perth WA and most recently, in Brisbane QLD, where we are in consultation with the Soldier Recovery Centre at Gallipoli Barracks to provide support to members. We are also able to provide some of these services, particularly employment and education, on line and via phone or skype.

There are currently over 1300 individuals being supported through Soldier On program and activities. This does not specifically include those who are receiving mental health support. However, over 1250 sessions were conducted during FY17-18, an increase from the 1000 offered the previous financial year. This is despite significant periods of staff vacancies and needing to establish new employees in the roles. While there were recruiting challenges, it was imperative to ensure that appropriately qualified and skilled clinicians were employed.

Specific to employment and education, Soldier On is currently supporting over 500 participants through our employment program. Over 230 are solely undertaking employment support, over 90 solely education and over 170 are undertaking both employment and education support. As at 10 July, 93 companies have signed the Soldier On Pledge and are dedicated to support the employment of service personnel and their families (see Annex B).

Pathways Networking Events

Soldier On's new Pathway Networking Events are being rolled out around the country. These events allow for service personnel and their family members, to meet representatives from the corporate sector in an informal environment. This provides the opportunity for the participants to talk to potential employers in a more open and direct way than is possible in interviews or large-scale expos. It also gives employers a chance to gain a better idea of the skills of each participant. This in turn enables them to provide advice on; what roles participants may be suited to, how to communicate their transferable skills in the application process, and how to secure that sometimes elusive interview, which could ultimately result in a role within the organisation.

While there has been a strong focus on employment for service personnel in the past 12 months, there is still greater need to ensure that individuals and employers truly understand their skills and find the right job. Underemployment should be just as concerning as unemployment, as job satisfaction is a key contributor to maintaining one's overall health. Soldier On's overarching aim for our employment program remains focused on ensuring individuals are truly job ready and finding the right job for them. The Pathways Networking Events are a key way to help us achieve this goal. So far in 2018, we have had 196 participants attend an event and 68 Pledge partners, education providers or potential pledge partners attend an event (some organisations have attended multiple times). This has seen 25 people go to an interview and 7 of them secure a job, as a direct result of them attending a Pathway Networking Event.

Feedback from those who attended our events has been extremely positive. Everyone we've heard back from, both the attendees and HR representatives, found the events to be extremely helpful. It allowed them to connect directly, in a relaxed atmosphere, whilst still being able to have confidential conversations about employment.

"This event helped me to extend my network and allowed me to see where my skills would be used" – Participant.

"The organisations who have come on board to help out [service personnel] is truly amazing" – Participant.

"I received an email the day after the pathways event inviting me for an interview, I would never have had the opportunity to sell myself like I did without Soldier On helping me." – Participant

"The Networking is a great idea to help people back into the workforce, or find new employment" – Participant

"It let me see that there are companies out there willing to help and meeting people who are serious about helping" – Participant

"Gave us the opportunity to see the skills and background veterans have locally – could be an opportunity to host out at Defence Precinct in Williamstown" – HR Representative

"Event was well organised – got to see some specific skills and ex-military experience that suits our program" – HR Representative

Pathways Events have now been held in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Newcastle, and Brisbane. Our aim is to hold these events in more locations in the future.

Soldier On survey

Soldier On recently published a survey for serving and ex-serving ADF personnel who have either participated in our program or are active on our social media. This survey is focused on transition and our overall services. While this survey is ongoing and aimed at informing continued improvements to the services we provide, some findings are relative to this inquiry. 153 responses have been collected as at 10 July 2018.

- 32% of respondents believe that transition services should commence 3-6 months prior to separation and 28% more than 6 months prior.
- When asked who they would prefer to deliver transition services 34% said Soldier On, 20% said ADF, 18% indicated that they didn't care and 16% chose 'other' with majority of comments indicating a mixture of ADF and Soldier On/ESO support would be best.
- It was clear that face-to-face support is the preferred mode of delivery, with 77% of respondents selecting this option.
- 67% of respondents believe that their spouse or family were impacted by their transition, 47% of all respondents felt there was not enough support for their family during this time. 18% of all respondents believe it could be improved and 5% of respondents felt there was adequate support. 20% of total responders indicated they did not have a spouse or family.
- 55% of respondents were interested in further education and 33% were looking to study at either the undergraduate or Post Graduate level.
- While overall, 55% indicated that they separated voluntarily, 76% identified individually as, or that a family member was, wounded, injured or ill. The five conditions with the highest prevalence were: Depression (60%), Anxiety or stress (56%), Back or Neck Pain (48%), PTSD (43%) and Chronic Pain (39%).

WHAT WE DO



“...of all things that Soldier On did for me one thing stood out above all others, and that was they genuinely cared about my situation. They provided the moral support I needed to get up every day and continue to search and apply for jobs every day. This level of care was unique to Soldier On...”

- NSW Veteran

At Soldier On, our mission is to ***work side by side with those who serve and protect Australia, and their families, HELPing them to secure their future.***

Our services aim to HELP individuals build resilience and create, and expand, meaningful connections with family, community and employers through:



HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Psychology, social activities and programs, sporting activities and programs and service initiatives.



EMPLOYMENT

Transition services, employment support (including post placement support), career development assistance .



LEARNING

Education and training programs, vocational training.



PARTICIPATION

Social activities and programs focused on connections with family, friends and the broader community, volunteering and sports programs.

soldieron.org.au

#SideBySide

In order to achieve this mission, Soldier On has a team of amazing staff who dedicate their time to delivering services directly to service personnel and their families. We have centres in the ACT, Concord NSW, Parkville VIC and offices in Perth WA, Adelaide SA, Brisbane QLD, Newcastle NSW and Albury NSW. Our volunteer network and the generosity of the community, allows for activities and events to be held across the nation and support many service personnel and families outside of city areas.

Soldier On is not funded by government. It is thanks to corporate sponsors, trusts, philanthropic support and the generosity of the community, that enables us to provide services to those who need them.

SOLDIER ON'S SERVICES

At Soldier On, we continue to adapt to meet the needs of service personnel and their families. This means providing services for the entire family, in areas that truly support connection with the greater community, whether participants are still serving or have separated from service.

Soldier On is focused on three key areas. Social and sporting activities, employment and education and psychological support. Whether our participants need to access services in one or all three areas, our staff are here to help them connect with others and to secure their futures.

Service personnel and their families are welcome at any of our centres across the country and can engage with staff on the ground to find out more about our services. We can also provide some of our services remotely, via phone and online resources. For more information on who Soldier On helps, please visit http://bit.ly/SO_Eligibility.

OUR STAFF

When you contact or drop in to one of our centres, you will be met by one of our friendly staff. They can talk you through all the services that are available directly at each centre. Together you can decide how you would like to engage with the Soldier On community and what support you would like to access.

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND SPORTING ACTIVITIES

One of the key aims at Soldier On is to provide service personnel and their families with the opportunity to connect with others, who understand the nature of their service. Many of the regular activities across the country include:



COFFEE CATCH UPS

A great way to meet your local Soldier On team, our amazing volunteers and service members and families.



CLASSES

Many of our centres hold regular classes including art, writing and music.



PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

Looking after your body is important and many of our centres offer regular physical activities such as yoga, sailing, cycling and golf.



SPORTS PROGRAMS

Soldier On's sports program is focused on developing partnerships and implementing programs with several of Australia's national sporting organisations, corporate supporters and international partners. Programs will run throughout the year for surfing, rowing, golf, cycling and tennis just to name a few.



EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION SUPPORT

Our dedicated Employment Officers provide one-on-one employment support to service personnel and their family members via phone, email, Skype or face-to-face meetings at one of our centres.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Soldier On provides in-house, evidence-based psychology treatments to service personnel, and their families, who have been impacted by their service to Australia.

MORE INFORMATION 1300 620 380

If you would like to know more about Soldier On or the activities and services available in your area, please contact Soldier On HQ or your state centre.

HQ info@soldieron.org.au

ACT act@soldieron.org.au

NSW nsw@soldieron.org.au

VIC vic@soldieron.org.au

SA sa@soldieron.org.au

QLD qld@soldieron.org.au

WA & NT wa@soldieron.org.au

soldieron.org.au

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The Soldier On Pledge

What is the Pledge?

The Pledge is a symbol of your organisation's support to the national security community, particularly in relation to employment opportunities. While the document is non-binding, it clearly outlines how and what organisations can do to create supportive workplaces and truly recognise the skills and attributes that ex-service men and women, and their families, bring to the Australian workforce. This is not a promise to handout jobs to ex-service personnel, or to show favouritism, you are being asked to provide greater opportunities, flexibility and to develop a greater understanding of the national security community, within your organisation.

Why you should take the Pledge

By taking the Pledge, employers are directly supporting the future of those who have served our country and their families. In turn, you are thanking them for their service to our nation. You are recognising their skills, their leadership and their commitment to the Australian public during and post service. You will be rewarded with highly skilled and motivated individuals, who provide diversity within your organisation and a form of leadership that is rarely seen outside of the military. From family members, you will see dedication, passion and commitment to their work.

Support to national security personnel and their families

Through our Employment Program, Soldier On is providing services to national security personnel, and their families, to ensure that they are job ready. We are working one on one with individuals to help them identify what they are looking for in their next career. Our services are designed to complement those provided through Federal Government Agencies and to provide a greater understanding of private industry. These services do not have an expiry date and can be accessed at any time.

Is there a fee?

Soldier On is a not-for-profit organisation, providing all employment services in-house. We will not charge recruiting or placement fees to organisations who sign the Pledge and use our service. Instead, we ask that you hold at least one fundraising event annually and consider workplace giving within your organisation. Funds raised through these activities will enable Soldier On to continue to deliver these vital services to our national security community and continue to engage you with a job ready workforce.

The Pledge is just the start

Once you have signed the Pledge, you will be able to advertise vacancies within your organisation on Soldier On's Job Board. Providing access to jobs is just the start.

A tiered sponsorship model has also been developed for the program and will enable a greater level of engagement, support and acknowledgement of your organisation. By working with Soldier On, we can assist you in developing flexible recruiting models such as internships, work placements, mentoring and train into employment opportunities. We can also work with your teams to educate not just about the skills and attributes of national security personnel, but to provide ongoing support, coaching or assistance with the individual once in your workplace, if required.



You will be provided with a Pledge Seal to use on your corporate website, branding, promotional items and proposals which may differentiate you from your competitors.

Signing the Pledge

When you have decided to sign the pledge, contact us at pledge@soldieron.org.au and we will send you the documentation.