



SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

Summary

Defence Families of Australia is the official federal government advisory body which advocates for and represents families of current serving ADF members. As all 11 members of the DFA National Executive, who live around the country, are partners of current serving members, DFA knows the lived experience of being a Defence family member.

Transition is not an isolated process that is tacked on to the end of a holiday. Transition from the ADF is a process that will come at the end of what is often a life that contains unique experiences. These unique experiences – which can also be challenges – are typically centred around mobility and long absences from home. Families need to be socially connected, emotionally prepared and well-informed about the journey they are on. Research has determined that transition in the case of medical discharge depends on how well the family can cope with and support the transitioning member. “The transition from military to civilian life is not done in isolation – the entire family unit is affected.”ⁱ It can be concluded that families need to be in a position of strength to support the transitioning member and adjust themselves to a civilian life.

DFA has heard it said that transition should begin at enlistment. If that is the case, then families need to be supported in various ways throughout their Defence journey to ensure they are ready to support the ADF member and themselves through their whole-of-family transition journey.

As Defence Families of Australia is in regular contact with the Department of Defence about improving support to families throughout their Defence journey, this submission is only going to focus on employment. Regarding the transition process specifically, this submission will outline how improving family participation in the transition process puts Defence Members and their families in the strongest position upon transition from the ADF.

1. Employment support to partners of current serving ADF members

Why partner employment is important:

This issue is important because of these statistics from the findings of the 2017 ADF Families Survey (published June 2017)ⁱⁱ:

- Based on the 2015 Defence Census, the unemployment rate for ADF partners is 14 percent, compared to six percent for the general population (page 10).
- Overall, 81 percent of partners indicated that they had experienced some form of career or employment sacrifice, while only 11 percent said that their career or employment had been affected (page 13).
- Overall, 22 percent of employed partners had difficulty securing employment in their current location (page 14).
- Taken together, all results relating to finding work indicate that while the majority of partners find work within their field on relocation, dissatisfaction with current work arrangements is relatively common (page 17).



Members with Dependants (Unaccompanied) MWD(U) are defined as ADF members who have a home with their Defence-recognised partner and/or dependants but are unable to live in that home for Service-related or personal reasons. MWD(U) status may be granted, for example, where an ADF member is required to serve in a specific location and their dependants are unable to move for recognised reasons such as health, employment or educational commitments.

Questions about MWD(U) were asked in the 2015 ADF Families Survey (published March 2016)ⁱⁱⁱ. On average, 25 percent of respondents had been classified MWD(U) at some stage. Fifty-five percent of these respondents cited their employment as a consideration for being this categorisation (page 9). The findings also noted that very few respondents were positive towards, or opening encouraging of, others taking up a MWD(U) posting (page 17).

It concerns DFA that some families live separately for years – which is acknowledged by many as challenging – in order for a partner to retain employment.

Investing in efforts to ensure partners of current serving members gain and maintain meaningful employment throughout their Defence journey is important to ensure the entire family is in the strongest position at transition. Meaningful employment contributes to financial independence and in such an expensive country as Australia, a second income is a necessity for many families to achieve that. Family members need to be mentally and emotionally ready for transition and meaningful employment throughout their Defence journey can contribute to this wellbeing. All of these factors are especially important in the case of medical discharge where the partner may become the primary breadwinner – a role that will be especially hard to fill if the family has only been given three months' notice until separation and the partner has had limited employment opportunities throughout their Defence journey.

Solutions for partner employment:

Defence Families of Australia has been researching the issue of partner employment with ADF partner and employment specialist Amanda McCue. Ms. McCue recently completed the research phase of her Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship into Defence partner employment and DFA is waiting to view her final report to determine our next advocacy steps for a more comprehensive national program here in Australia.

Based on DFA's research to-date, there are three key components to addressing Defence partner employment:

- Job readiness (such as resume writing, interview and career coaching).
- Education for employers on the business case for hiring a Defence partner and some of the policy and procedures they can implement to assist partners gain and maintain meaningful employment.
- Monitoring and fostering the connection of partners with Defence partner friendly employers.

(Financial assistance for education opportunities for partners also has some role to play although there is limited evidence yet as to the most effective assistance that will result in a mobile, longer-term career.)

On behalf of Navy, Army and Air Force, Defence Community Organisation, or DCO, offers a broad range of programs and services to help Defence families manage the military way of life. Through DCO's Partner Employment Assistance Program, in each posting location, partners of ADF personnel can apply for up to \$1500 funding to access a range of employment-related initiatives that address the job readiness component. There are some restrictions on this funding however, including timeframes in which it can be accessed. Unlike the Career Transition Assistance Scheme offered to transitioning Defence members, PEAP is not accessible to partners who are transitioning from Defence, despite it being a time when assistance is often required. DFA would like to see job readiness assistance offered to partners during the transition



process, especially in the case of a medical discharge situation where the family may rely on the partner becoming the main breadwinner. Assistance could be afforded through the extension of the PEAP or through inclusion of partners in the Career Transitions Assistance Scheme offered to members.

In June 2018 DFA added new pages to our website which are designed to address, to a limited degree, the employer education and connection components. In consultation with Ms. McCue, DFA has developed a check list for the 'gold standard' of what it means to be a Defence partner friendly employer. Employers involved in the Prime Minister's Veterans' Employment Program who meet the standard of the checklist have been invited to provide a link to the employment section of their website for inclusion in our initiative.

DFA developed this unique checklist because some aspects of Defence life, such as moving and long absences from home, can present employment challenges for Defence partners. Regional locations can be especially challenging. DFA is also told of employers who actively discriminate against Defence partners because of their mobility, even though the average Australian civilian employee is not staying in jobs long-term. Defence partners need employers who understand for example, that gaps in a resume don't mean a Defence partner is not committed to their profession – it just means they may have been posted to some challenging locations and they've had to be resourceful.

Who will provide a holistic, long term solution?

As stated previously, DFA is waiting for further research from Ms. McCue to determine what a national program should look like and who should deliver it. Based on preliminary research, any participatory program requires oversight to keep employers accountable to the standards of the program. Again, based on preliminary research, with a growing number of private businesses, Ex-Service Organisations and State Governments entering into this space, national, objective, oversight is necessary to ensure consistency of delivery in all of the areas DFA has identified contribute to partner employment. The Federal Government, who has a vested interest in partners being meaningfully employed, is best placed to provide this stable oversight.

2. Involvement of and information for families about the Transition process

In recent times, the ADF has invested in improving the process for members transitioning from Defence life. The acknowledgement that a supported transition puts members in a strong position for a successful life following their service, is one that should be extended to the member's family also.

There are some key services and supports afforded to transitioning members that are important to note. Through the ADF Transitions cell, Defence members are assigned a Transitions Officer and encouraged to attend seminars to help prepare them for transition into civilian life. There is personalised administrative support, and career counselling services that members are able to access for up to 12 months after they separate from the ADF.

Families are invited to attend the member's appointments with the Transition Officer, as well as the seminars, but neither of these avenues offer any substantial advice or support for the family members themselves. DFA delegates have spoken to partners who were disappointed that they were encouraged to attend the transition seminars, only to find that the two days of presentations featured almost no information for families. The same has been said for the *ADF Member and Family Transition Guide*, where families are included in the title of the document but only provided a small paragraph on services available through DCO and the Defence Special Needs support group (Page 55), neither of which are services available to families after the member has transitioned.



Solutions:

Seminars

In order to make the seminars more relevant and user friendly for families, it would be beneficial to offer breakout sessions at the seminars that deliver family-specific information, such as supports available to ex-serving families, Centrelink and Medicare information and where help can be sought for a transitioned member in crisis. Having a separate, optional session that runs alongside the main seminar might appeal to those who need the family information in addition to the other content. Likewise, partners would then have the option of only attending at the specific times rather than sitting through the two day seminar with potentially very little for them to take away.

Transition guide

Additional and relevant information for families needs to be included in the Transitions guide. Like the seminars, there is scope to provide families with some transition process information, but information on ex-service supports, Centrelink, Medicare, crisis care and even some emotional preparation tools would make the guide useful for families. It may be that a 'Transition Guide for Families' document would better cater to the specific needs of families, rather than including it in the already existing document.

3. Families and emotional support

ADF members rely on emotional support from their families throughout their entire career, and especially when it is time for them to transition out. Partners and other family members are crucial in supporting the member in making their decision to transition, through the administrative process, and during their adjustment to civilian life. Emotional support plays a major role in how well a member transitions and their future success.

This is a responsibility that families are taking on during a time when they are also experiencing drastic changes in their lives. Not only is their family dynamic and relationship with the serving member undergoing a change, they may also be required to relocate, find employment and in some cases become the main breadwinner for the family, all while losing critical support mechanisms associated with Defence life. For families who have supported a member through their entire career, Defence becomes a part of their identity also, and many of their social supports and friend networks are tied in with their member's service.

Currently there is limited action being taken by Defence or other supporting organisations to prepare all families for the role they play in emotionally supporting the member, or the emotional impact of transitioning from the ADF may have on their family life. DFA believe that in order to support a successful transition for the member, families need to be educated and prepared for what they may face. DFA is aware of VVCS' Stepping Out program, however does not have enough knowledge to comment on it.

Solutions:

For current serving families, the main avenue for education and emotional support is through the DCO area offices in their location. These offices facilitate education programs around deployment and absence, and offer the services of professionally trained social workers. During the transition process however, few families are being encouraged to seek out professional support to navigate the changes and emotional impacts on their families.



DCO's area offices could play a larger role in preparing and educating families during the transition process. This would include encouraging members and families to attend counselling sessions with the social work team, for personalised facilitation and planning for transition. Similar to DCO's absence education programs (FamilySMART, KidSMART), a transition education program, or TransitionSMART, could be developed and delivered to families at either the Transition Seminars as a breakout option, or facilitated throughout the year. In this way, family-focused information can be provided proactively and to large groups of interested people. Lastly, in line with what transitioning members are offered, families should be able to access DCO's support services for up to 12 months following the member's transition. It is within the first year after separation that families are most likely to encounter relationship and family issues, and it is important that there is a familiar and relevant service they can access.

While it is acknowledged that the DCO area offices are not currently resourced to service transitioning families, they are best placed to help ADF families to navigate the practical and emotional challenges they may face on transition. Therefore, their involvement in the transition process and their services should be expanded accordingly.

ⁱ "Support to military families in transition: a review. Veteran Ombudsman Jan 2016. Government of Canada. Page 5. Available at <http://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/pdfs/reports/Support-to-Military-Families-in-Transition-Eng.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.defence.gov.au/DCO/Family/Survey.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.defence.gov.au/DCO/Family/Survey.asp>