

Committee Secretariat Senate

Select Committee on Issues Relating to Advocacy Services for Veterans Accessing
Compensation and Income Support Department of the Senate

PO Box 6100, Parliament House,

Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Submission - Veterans' Advocacy, Independence, and Ethical Standards

Dear Committee Secretariat

1. Executive Summary

National Association for Veteran Advocacy (NAVA) is a newly established, independent body dedicated to lifting ethical and professional standards in the veterans' advocacy sector. Unlike government-controlled entities, our approach is **independent and self-regulatory**, designed to build public trust, transparency, and accountability without political or bureaucratic interference.

We submit that the future of veterans' advocacy must be grounded in **independence, integrity, and professional accountability**. Veterans deserve advocates who are transparent, competent, and ethical, supported by a sector that holds itself to the highest standards.

This submission is presented not only on behalf of the new independent body but also in alignment with the practical work being undertaken by Military Claims. Military Claims continues to deliver direct advocacy services to veterans, and the lessons from this work have informed the creation of the broader body. Together, they demonstrate a commitment to both hands-on support for veterans and a structural, sector-wide solution to raise standards and protect veterans across Australia.

The Committee's review is timely. As the advocacy sector grows in complexity, it is essential to reinforce independence, strengthen ethical culture, and prevent the risks of exploitation or politicisation. Our organisation has been created precisely to fill that gap.

2. Ethical Framework - Our Code of Conduct

Our organisation operates under a binding **Code of Conduct** that establishes:

- **Independence:** All advice and advocacy must be free from political, commercial, or personal influence.
- **Integrity & Honesty:** Full disclosure of interests and a strict prohibition on misleading claims.
- **Confidentiality:** Veterans' information is safeguarded under rigorous privacy and security protocols.
- **Accountability:** Clear processes to investigate and address breaches of conduct, including sanctions.
- **Respect & Inclusivity:** All veterans are treated with dignity, fairness, and equity.
- **Public Purpose:** Advocacy must prioritise long-term veteran welfare and community trust.
- **Fair and Reasonable Fees:** Advocacy services must be transparent, proportionate to the work involved, and never exploitative. Fees should reflect genuine value for veterans, ensure access regardless of financial circumstances, and **must not be applied to ongoing pensions or entitlements intended for day-to-day living expenses**.

This framework ensures that every advocate operating under our umbrella is accountable not only to veterans, but also to their peers and the public interest. It also demonstrates that **self-regulation can**

be effective. Rather than creating new statutory entities, Parliament should recognise and encourage **independent frameworks** like ours that already enforce ethical standards.

3. Why Independence Matters

Independence is central to restoring confidence in the veteran advocacy sector. We believe that creating statutory bodies risks politicisation, duplication of bureaucracy, and erosion of veterans' trust. True independence means:

- **Freedom from political influence:** ensuring advocacy outcomes are not shaped by government priorities or departmental pressures.
- **Freedom from commercial capture:** preventing large institutions or entities with vested interests from dominating the sector.
- **Freedom to enforce ethical standards:** giving the sector itself the power to investigate, sanction, and improve practice without reliance on government funding or oversight.

Independent bodies like ours provide a platform for sector-led accountability. We are veterans working with veterans, and we understand that trust must be earned through transparency, professionalism, and results.

4. Background on Military Claims

Founders' Lived Experience

Military Claims was founded by a veteran of the Australian Defence Force with direct, personal experience navigating the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) claims system. This lived experience, combined with the professional expertise of the leadership and advocacy team, underpins the organisation's ability to deliver results with empathy, trust, and cultural understanding.

Mission and Purpose

The mission of Military Claims is to be Australia's most trusted and effective veteran advocacy service. The organisation exists to ensure that every ADF veteran can access the compensation and support they deserve - with dignity, clarity, and care.

Key Achievements

- Assisted hundreds of Australian Defence Force veterans in successfully navigating complex DVA and CSC claims processes.
- Built a reputation as a trusted, veteran-owned service with a **5-star client satisfaction rating** and strong referral base (over 60% of clients come from referrals).
- Established enduring partnerships with medical providers, support networks, and veteran communities across Australia.
- Developed systemised processes, staff training pathways, and secure data management practices to ensure consistency, scalability, and ethical handling of sensitive information.
- Recognised within the veteran community for providing compassionate, transparent, and effective advocacy services that prioritise dignity and fairness.

Professionalism, Ethics, and Independence

Military Claims distinguishes itself through:

- A culture of **fairness and transparency**, supported by documented policies, clear fee structures, and structured complaints processes.
- Independence from external political or institutional influence, ensuring all advocacy is carried out in the **best interests of clients**.
- A professional, systemised operation that combines legal and advocacy knowledge with ethical governance and data security best practices.

5. The Case for Fair and Reasonable Fee Structures

A critical part of trust is ensuring fees are **fair and reasonable**. Veterans often approach advocates after unsuccessful attempts through free services. While fee-for-service models provide choice and professional capacity, they must never be exploitative.

Our position is:

- **Transparency first:** Veterans must know all fees upfront, with no hidden charges.
- **Proportionate to value:** Fees should reflect the time, expertise, and outcomes achieved.
- **No pension garnishing:** Ongoing entitlements intended for living expenses must never be subject to deduction or garnishment.
- **Accessible to all:** Payment models should ensure that financial hardship does not prevent access to quality advocacy.

By embedding these principles into our Code of Conduct, we provide veterans with both choice and protection. This strikes a balance between professional service delivery and safeguarding vulnerable clients.

6. Challenges Within DVA

While our submission is focused on independence and ethics, it is important to acknowledge the systemic issues veterans face when navigating the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). These challenges directly impact the wellbeing of veterans and increase the demand for advocacy:

- **Excessive Delays:** Many veterans wait months or even years for claims to be processed. These delays cause unnecessary stress, exacerbate health issues, and undermine trust in the system.
- **Inconsistent Policy Adherence:** Veterans report markedly different outcomes depending on the delegate assigned to their claim. This inconsistency fosters perceptions of unfairness and unpredictability, particularly when decisions appear to deviate from established Statements of Principles.
- **Complexity of Claims:** Veterans are often confronted with multiple overlapping Acts, unclear processes, and excessive requests for medical evidence, which can deter or exhaust claimants.

These issues do not stem from ill intent but from systemic under-resourcing and fragmented processes. However, they create an environment where independent advocates are essential to guide veterans through an often-overwhelming system. Our independent body seeks to complement, not replace, DVA's role by ensuring veterans have access to fair, professional support.

7. Recommendations

- **Support Independent Oversight:** Encourage the growth of independent, self-regulatory bodies that establish their own Codes of Conduct and accountability frameworks.
- **Ensure Fair and Reasonable Fee Practices:** Fee structures must be transparent, proportionate, and accessible, with safeguards against exploitative models. This provides veterans with genuine choice while maintaining trust in the system.
- **Reject Statutory Capture:** Avoid creating government-controlled bodies that risk politicisation, bureaucracy, or conflicts of interest.
- **Recognise Ethical Independence:** Ensure future policy frameworks acknowledge independent codes and self-regulation as valid, credible governance models.
- **Promote Training & Professionalism:** Encourage sector-led training, mentoring, and accreditation processes, rather than state-mandated pathways.
- **Address DVA Systemic Issues:** Invest in reducing delays, improving digital systems, and ensuring consistent policy application to restore veterans' trust.

8. Clarification of Independence from VESPIIA

We also wish to clarify our position in relation to the July 2025 submission lodged by VESPIIA to the Senate Inquiry. That submission incorrectly referenced our organisation and included recommendations - particularly Recommendation 6, which sought to prohibit commission-based or percentage-based fee models, that we do not endorse and emphatically reject. Our business model, consistent with other independent service advocacy groups, relies on transparent, fair, and reasonable percentage-based arrangements that provide veterans with access to professional services. We have formally disassociated from VESPIIA and request that our independence from that body be clearly recognised to prevent any misrepresentation.

9. Closing

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. Veterans deserve an advocacy system that is **independent, ethical, and effective**, one that puts their needs above politics or profit. Our body stands ready to support that vision and to demonstrate how independence and ethics can coexist in a practical, enforceable framework.

Kind regards,

Christopher Goodlet
Managing Director / DVA Advocate
Military Claims (Formerly Ronald James Consultants)

