

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

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Key Points:

- **More than half of the ADF population are married or in permanent relationships.**
- **Healthy and well-prepared families can facilitate a positive transition.**
- **An important yet overlooked component of healthy families is the career development and employment of ADF spouses too many of whom experience unemployment, underemployment, lack of employment security and dissatisfaction with work arrangements.**
- **Spouse employment can be a facilitator of a successful transition.**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **INCREASE EFFORTS TO FOCUS ON THE WELLBEING OF THE WHOLE ADF FAMILY AND ENGAGE SPOUSES IN TRANSITION PREPARATION AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE AND MAINTAIN ENGAGEMENT**
- **INCREASE EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER SUPPORT FOR CIVILIAN SPOUSES OF ADF PERSONNEL**

Transition is a significant milestone in military life. Over half of the current-serving permanent ADF population are married or in interdependent relationshipsⁱ. Therefore it is not just the Member who undergoes a transition but an entire family. This is an important aspect often overlooked in policy and communications about transition. The recent [Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme's Mental Health Prevalence and Pathways to Care](#) report identified the most commonly reported reason for transition as the impact of service life on familyⁱⁱ. This is consistent with other surveys of ADF personnel. The [2017 ADF Families Study](#) reported that in the last five years two family-related factors have featured consistently in the top 10 reasons for leaving among transitioning ADF members.ⁱⁱⁱ Families both play a significant role in transition and are significantly impacted by it. They also have the capacity to support and facilitate a successful transition. Therefore it makes sense to ensure that the ADF family is prepared for and supported through transition.

The [UK Centre for Social Justice](#) report on Military Families and Transition^{iv} states that “family relationships are particularly important for military personnel, who come under numerous pressures throughout their working life” and that “military spouses play a pivotal role in enabling veterans to make a successful transition from active service back to civilian life”.

The Canadian Veterans Ombudsman states in his [2016 review](#) of support to military families in transition^v that:

“a successful transition from military to civilian life is essential to the long-term independence, financial security, health and social integration of the transitioning member and their family. This process affects the entire family...Adequate, accessible support to families is important to their long-term success.”

A recent veteran-centred model of support recently released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) identifies social support (including family relationships and friendships) as a key element and states that “social connections with family and friends are viewed as a protective factor for a person’s wellbeing” and that individuals whose spouses and family members provide psychological and physical support have improved mental and physical wellbeing compared to those with less social support.^{vi}

Ensuring a family is in good health (physically, mentally and financially) is a crucial component of a well-prepared family, which ultimately facilitates a positive transition experience for an ADF member.

An important yet overlooked aspect of healthy families is the career development and employment of civilian spouses of ADF members. ADF spouse/partner employment has been identified by [Defence Families of Australia](#) (DFA) as a critical issue for ADF families and a primary advocacy issue for DFA.

Frequent relocations and the frequent and/or lengthy absences from home of the ADF member (which place additional family responsibilities on the spouse) challenge a spouse’s pursuit of a satisfying career. Thus many ADF families are heavily reliant on the ADF member’s income because the spouse’s career and employment prospects are compromised. As such, a family’s primary source of income may be threatened by transition from the military^{vii}. This financial stress is compounded by the loss of benefits such as subsidised housing.

The 2017 ADF Families Survey reports that:

“ADF partners experience high levels of unemployment and other career and employment sacrifices”

and that overall career satisfaction is low. It reports that the unemployment and underemployment rates for ADF spouses are higher than national female unemployment and underemployment rates. Over 80% of spouse respondents reported making career sacrifices due to their partner’s ADF service. 35% reported being underemployed in terms of hours worked, 20% reported being over qualified and 44% reported impairment of work related benefits accrual. The report concluded that:

“compared to the rest of the Australian workforce, unemployment levels among ADF partners are high. For ADF partners who are employed, overall satisfaction with their work arrangements is not very high. These partners commonly experience underemployment, lack of employment security and often need to make compromises in terms of the amount and nature of work they perform”

In addition to immediate financial disadvantages of unemployment and underemployment, there are some long term financial consequences for those who engage in less paid work, including the lack of accumulation of leave and superannuation benefits. The 2015 Defence Census^{viii} reported that the average length of time a spouse was out of work following a service-related relocation was 5.4 months and that over half of those who relocated earned less in the new location. Thus there are cumulative and long-term effects of multiple relocations.

Work impacts health and wellbeing. Two of the key assumptions of the Psychology of Working Framework^{ix} are that “work is an essential aspect of life and an essential component of mental health” and that “working has the potential to fulfil three fundamental human needs – the need for survival and power; the need for social connection; and the need for self-determination”. There is evidence that underemployment and poor quality work is a greater health risk and leads to poorer mental health outcomes than being unemployed which in itself is a health risk.^x Research as part of the Timor Leste Family Study findings suggest that ADF spouse satisfaction with their own employment should be examined as an indicator of wellbeing^{xi}. The 2017 ADF Families Study reported that only 55% of civilian spouses of ADF members were satisfied with their capacity to deal with stress and only 53% were satisfied with financial security and that many employed spouses aren’t satisfied with their work arrangements.

The 2017 Families Study also reported that 28% of spouses were unaware of transition services provided by Defence, 56% were aware of them but hadn’t used them, and only 13% had used them and found them useful. A further 3% had used them but not found it useful. This data indicates that the majority of families are not aware of or are not engaging with available services whilst the Member is still serving i.e. ADF families are not seeking or engaging support from Defence to prepare long-term for transition therefore **there is a risk that families are reacting to, rather than preparing for, transition**. Long-term preparation is essential for preparedness especially for unexpected transitions such as medical discharges.

- **All of this indicates that many ADF families may be less mentally and financially healthy as they could be (which places them at risk during significant life events including transition) and that they aren’t prepared for transition especially when it is unplanned.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INCREASE EFFORTS TO FOCUS ON THE WELLBEING OF THE WHOLE ADF FAMILY AND ENGAGE SPOUSES/FAMILIES IN TRANSITION PREPARATION AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE AND MAINTAIN ENGAGEMENT

Families should be viewed as active and essential assets within the Australian Defence Force community.

A healthy and well-prepared family is more likely to transition successfully and more likely to provide ADF members with supportive circumstances in which to transition thus reducing transition-related stress and decreasing the incidence of risky behaviours. A [Canadian Veteran’s Ombudsman’s report](#)^{xii} involving a small qualitative research study found that the greatest source of support for a CAF member during transition was the spouse, followed by counsellors then friends and children. **Thus 2 out of 3 greatest forms of support are family members**. Both the literature review and qualitative study components of the research noted that **preparation and planning and including family members in the transition planning were required for successful transition**.

The UK [Forces in Mind Trust](#) (FiMT) [Transition Mapping Study](#) in 2013 (TMS13) defined a successful transition as “one that safeguards the financial, psychological and emotional ‘health’ of the individual and those closest to them.”^{xiii} FiMT states “the extent to which a Service leaver’s family is able to help is often reflected in transition success, but is rarely considered”. Two of the recommendations in

the FiMT TMS13 were i) the formal involvement of families in the resettlement process and ii) engage the family. The 2017 update reports that more is being done in the UK to involve spouses and further stakeholder consultations on family engagement in the transition process are planned.

More effort by Defence should be placed on creating and sustaining healthy families throughout their ADF life and preparing them for transition. Defence should increase promotion and provision of transition services to families and encourage participation in them throughout the course of the ADF Member's career and not just when transition is imminent (otherwise what is really being provided are discharge services not transition services). This could perhaps be achieved by incorporating elements of transition preparation in DCO programs and services that are more widely known and accessed by families (although overall the 2017 survey indicates that many DCO services are not known about nor accessed). It should also include running transition courses at times that family members can attend, restructuring courses to be less intensive than the current two day model and/or providing online options to make information more accessible.

Defence Families of Australia have outlined in their submission to this enquiry how Defence could better involve families in the transition process and better prepare ADF members and families for a successful transition.

2. INCREASE EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER SUPPORT FOR CIVILIAN SPOUSES OF ADF PERSONNEL

Dual incomes via long-term satisfactory spouse employment can make a significant contribution to financial readiness for separation (voluntary or involuntary) from the ADF, ease financial and associated emotional stress associated with the member finding civilian employment, and provide financial security for veterans and their families (especially if the earning capacity of the veteran is compromised by injury or illness).

As Denie Dempsey (wife of former US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff in the US General Martin Dempsey) said of US military:

“Steadily employed spouses will help the country transition its young heroes to the civilian workforce...Fewer would suffer financial crises if their spouses were gainfully employed, and particularly so if they were able to save and invest that second income over the course of their service”

The UK Centre for Social Justice report states that:

“spousal employment can be a crucial part of a successful transition to civilian life for some military families. The stability provided by a second income, combined with the support of social networks that come as part of working, give families more resilience at a time of change.”

The AIHW study identifies income and finance as another key domain. Whilst it misses the opportunity to discuss family income it identifies the relationship between finance and health/wellbeing and also reports that veterans who leave the military due to illness or disability may have a diminished income earning capacity and thus diminished financial security. Spouse employment can therefore be a protective factor; not just for the veteran but for the whole family.

In a recent meeting at the MoD in London the Assistant Head Welfare Support, Chief of Defence People reported that spouse employment was forming part of the transition discussions in the UK. RAND Europe recommended that further in-depth research should be conducted in on the impact of spousal employment on transition.^{xiv} In 2015 FiMT reported that spousal employment was one of four areas in which families could be more effectively supported in the transition process^{xv}.

Effective and comprehensive assistance for spouse employment (and subsequent family readiness for transition) requires a holistic approach involving whole-of-government (with particular emphasis on Defence), and the public and private sectors (in particular employers).

An example of a whole-of-government approach to family wellbeing was the **2011 Obama Administration’s “Strengthening our Military Families”**^{xvi} initiative that combined the work of the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security in supporting military families with support from the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, State, Interior, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Energy, Labor, Environmental Protection Agency and Education. Each cabinet secretary gave their personal commitment to providing better services for military families. The initiative addressed 4 key areas: enhancing the wellbeing and psychological health of the military family; ensuring excelling in military children’s education and their development; developing career and educational opportunities for military children and increasing child care availability and quality.

I recently undertook a 5-week tour of the UK, US and Canada with the support of a [Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship](#) to investigate approaches to spouse employment in those countries and my findings and subsequent recommendations will be released shortly via written report. Recommendations in the report are focused on improving career support to military spouses and ultimately improving career outcomes via enhanced policy and services.

Author Bio: I am a career development practitioner and a military spouse. I provide career services to transitioning military, veterans and military spouses and am an independent advocate for military spouse employment.

ⁱ Across the ADF 40% are married with a further 24% in some form of interdependent relationship. 30% are single. Air Force has the highest percentage of members married or in relationships (72%). Defence Census 2015 Public Report. Prepared by Australian Survey Research Group.

ⁱⁱ Forbes D, Van Hoof M, Lawrence-Wood E et al (2018). Pathways to Care, Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study. Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra. Available from https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/health%20and%20wellbeing/research_dev/socialresearch/TWRP-Pathways-to-care-report.PDF

ⁱⁱⁱ 2017 ADF Families Survey. Available from http://www.defence.gov.au/DCO/_Master/documents/Family-Survey/2017-Survey.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MILITARY-FAMILIES.pdf>

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

^{vi} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Development of a veteran-centred model: a working paper. Cat. No. PHE 225. Canberra:AIHW

^{vii} The 2015 Senate Inquiry into the mental health of ADF serving personnel reported that it can take weeks to months for some veterans to receive income from the superannuation or pension thus creating barriers for essential functions like daily living. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/ADF_Mental_Health/Report/c06

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- viii Defence Census 2015 Public Report. Prepared by Australian Survey Research Group.
- ix Duffy R, Bluestein D, Diemer M et al. (2016) The Psychology of Working Theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63(2) pp127-148
- x Butterworth P, Leach LS, Strazdins L et al. The Psychosocial quality of work determines whether employment has benefits for mental health: results from a longitudinal national household panel survey. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* Published Online First 14 March 2011. Doi:10.1136/oem.2010.059030
- x <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/having-a-bad-job/>
- x Milner A and LaMontagne D. Underemployment and mental health: comparing fixed-effects and random-effects regression approaches in an Australian working population cohort. *Occupational Environmental Medicine*. Published online first: 18 November 2016. Doi:10.1136/oemed-2016-103706
- xi Runge CE, Waller M, MacKenzie et al. Spouse of Military Members' Experiences and Insights: Qualitative Analysis of Responses to an Open-Ended Question in a Survey of Health and Wellbeing. *PLoS ONE* 9(12):e411475. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0114755
- xii <http://www.ombudsman-veterans.gc.ca/eng/reports/reports-reviews/transition#g>
- xiii Continue to Work. The Transition Mapping Study 2017. Forces in Mind Trust http://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FIMT_TMS_Report_2017_FINAL_PDF.pdf
- xiv RAND report RB9928 available from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9928.html
- xv <https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/supporting-the-forces-in-mind-trust.html>
- xvi <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a550567.pdf>