

# BUILDING EXCELLENCE IN SUPPORT AND TRAINING

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## AN EVALUATION

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## General Introduction

**T**his report gives an account of the research conducted by Better Enterprises Pty Ltd in fulfilment of the requirement to ...

*Provide an evaluation of the Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) Grant Program in terms of the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the Program (contract, schedule, Part A).*

The evaluation was conducted during the months of April, May, June and July 2002. It covered the BEST program from its inception in 1999 until the present, though excluded the fourth round of funding which took place mid-way through the evaluation.

The evaluators used a range of information-collecting approaches ranging from informal conversations through focus groups to carefully structured survey questionnaires, and analysis of existing databases

The evaluation took as its starting point the statements of intention as presented in the Program Guidelines (Revised October 2001), particularly as expressed in the Aim, Objectives and Outcomes sections of the guidelines.

Information for the evaluation has been obtained from relevant documents held by the Department, consultations with Departmental staff in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC), Queensland (QLD), South Australia (SA), Western Australia (WA) and Tasmania (TAS). Focus groups with

representatives of Ex Service Organisations (ESO's) were also conducted in these States and Territories. Survey questionnaires were prepared and distributed to:

1. All ESO's that had applied for assistance in any one of the three rounds of BEST funding;
2. The BEST Managers in State/Territory offices; and
3. Claims Assessors in all State/Territory offices.

In addition, interviews were held with a number of key people in the Department and the Veterans' Review Board, as well as practitioners in a selection of ESO's. Some ESO representatives made personal submissions to the evaluators.

Some limited, but clearly indicative, statistics have been obtained from computer systems within the Department.

Finally, some visits and phone interviews were made with some ESO's and support centres that had been drawn to our attention as places where some innovative approaches were being undertaken and/or good practice was a characteristic of the organisation's activities.

## **Findings**

Data from all surveys, interviews, focus groups and informal conversations has been analysed and presented in 31 tables, 2 figures and about 80 pages of text. Extensive comments from 80 ESO representatives have been content analysed, and these have been supplemented, and sometimes contrasted with comments from BEST Managers and Claims Assessors.

In common with many evaluation projects, this project was less than ideal because data that would have shed useful light on many questions was simply not available, and could not easily be obtained. Monitoring strategies are often seen as onerous intrusions into daily responsibilities by staff. The gathering of data on a routine basis and by means of a small number of extra tick boxes in systems, can make a huge difference to the accurate and informative evaluation of how a program is performing.

## **Conclusions**

We have drawn a number of summary conclusions from our analyses, the interpretation of results and from weighing up comments from stakeholder representatives. The conclusions in full are on pages 89 - 94. A précis of those conclusions follows.

- The BEST Program is fulfilling a very important linking role by assisting ESO's to help veterans and their dependents;
- It is one of several Department provisions that fit closely together to serve the veteran community;
- There is no doubt that many veterans need and appreciate assistance in making claims for pensions or benefits, or in appealing the decisions that are made in respect of their claims;
- There is some very clear evidence that veterans' and dependents' claims are more likely to have a successful outcome (interpreted as a payment to the claimant) when that claim is a represented one;
- The Department has a legitimate and positive interest in seeing the 'quality' of the assistance provided by pensions practitioners and advocates being given at high levels. It is also keen to have its support to ESO's result in better presented and argued claims and a more proficient claims assessment process;
- There are many issues, however, surrounding the objective of seeking improved 'quality' of claims at the primary determining level. These issues need to be separated out and the program's objectives more accurately described. Performance indicators and standards ought also to be defined;
- The program could benefit from more deliberate funding strategies (changed as required from round to round) to encourage changes and improvements to the claims and appeals processes, and to make the limited amount of funding go further;
- Travel costs are a particular problem in areas where isolated veterans need assistance in making claims;
- Welfare assistance, also, has not received any direct funding to date. Clarification is needed around this issue;
- There is a real problem for ESO's that have not been recipients of funding in earlier rounds and wish now to benefit from the program. The funding strategies clearly favour the continuation of funding for those already receiving grants;
- We consider the computer leasing arrangement to have served its earlier purpose and should now be replaced by a computer purchasing approach. This is to overcome the many problems experienced by ESO's and more importantly to free up some of the limited money available in order to benefit other deserving ESO's that currently miss out on funding;
- The amount of financial assistance sought by ESO's exceeds the amount available and therefore there is a tension in the program between access and equity on the one hand and increased efficiency and effectiveness on the other. There is a resultant apparent trade-off between the number of organisations being funded and the amount they are funded. The 'ESO unit cost' under BEST appears to be diminishing by the year;
- There is a need for the 'quality' of pension assistance and advocacy to continue to press towards a high professional standard. This, coupled with the changing ethos in voluntary activity, suggests that ESO activities should move towards structures that offer a more efficient and effective service. Practitioners likewise need to be encouraged to become more professional, and better trained;

- Quite large numbers of practitioners advise and assist very small numbers of veterans and dependents. It is difficult for any service provider to maintain good quality service with such small numbers of 'clients'. In the interests of a more consistent standard of practitioner support, other approaches, such as a two-tiered structure to process claims (as is in place already in some areas) should be seriously considered;
- Combined ESO structures also offer many benefits, very few disadvantages, and should be encouraged
- Electronic support through the Internet plays a crucial role and electronic lodgement should assist further in providing an effective and efficient service to veterans and dependents;
- The statistical monitoring of the program is inadequate and needs to be urgently addressed;
- The program needs more funding and that this funding should be directed towards making the standard of pensions assistance and advocacy more uniformly professional in standard.

## **Recommendations**

We have made 8 recommendations as follows. Each of them is elaborated in full in the relevant section of the full report. We might have made a number more and at a more detailed level, but it seemed to us that before these 8 recommendations could be implemented, there would need to be some open discussion about options, and that therefore any more detailed recommendations on our part would be to pre-empt this open discussion and consultation. The recommendations as reported between pages 94 and 99 of the report are as follows.

- 1 The program should be continued, and funding for it should be increased. (p. 94.)**
- 2 The stated aims, objectives, and outcomes should be examined in order to make them clearer and less ambiguous - particularly the objectives. (p. 95.)**
- 3 More specific funding strategies should be introduced in order to direct the available funds towards the achievement of specific goals, including welfare goals when they are clarified. (p. 95.)**
- 4 More 'openness' should accompany the funding decision process. (p. 96.)**
- 5 The current leasing approach to equipment should be replaced by computer purchase arrangements. (p. 96.)**
- 6 A restructured monitoring strategy should be put in place (a) to implement a more efficient process to ensure that ESOs fulfil their requirements and are**

accountable, and (b) to monitor the program as a whole in relation to its objectives. (p. 96.)

- 7 Analysis of practitioner contribution to the quality of claims should be undertaken and the results of that analysis used to inform training and development strategies. (p. 97.)
- 8 More systematic feedback processes should be implemented. (p. 99.)

# DETAILED REPORT

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## **Approach to the Evaluation (Methodology)**

**S**everal methods were used to obtain data and opinions for this evaluation.

### ***Departmental files and corporate memory***

Much useful information was expected to come from Departmental files and from talking to Department staff.

The Department, as we soon discovered, does undertake its own on going analyses of the program. We reviewed the results of these analyses.

### ***Summary of BEST grantee Quarterly Reports***

Quarterly reports are produced and were available for our inspection.

### ***Departmental statistics***

Departmental statistics are collected, though not on an extensive scale, and some of the analyses we had sought were not readily available, in part because the kind of data we wanted to analyse is not regularly acquired, and because even that data which might have seemed revealing, was not consistently or reliably gathered. But some analyses were possible and sought. These are reported later.

## ***Ministerial issues***

People associated with the BEST program have written to the Minister about their concerns and interest. A sample of these ministerials was made available to us. We have examined and analysed the contents of this correspondence for information of relevance to the evaluation.

## ***BEST Guidelines and Administrative documentation***

Guidelines and Administrative documentation are important sources of policy thinking and practical methods of regulation and reporting. They are pivotal documents for conducting an evaluation, since those administering the program and those that are beneficiaries of it, should be fulfilling in their respective roles the process for administration and accountability that have been set down in them or any subsequent rulings.

While statements of purpose, aim or objective are critical statements of intent, guidelines and other documentation generally fill the gaps in terms of strategy and accountability and provide useful information to ensure that consistency and quality standards are met. Hence we examined these documents in order to guide our data collection, interviews and surveys so that questions were asked which would provide answers that are clear, unambiguous and informative.

We have also examined formal Agreements between the Department and those ESO's that were successful in obtaining a grant.

## ***Survey of BEST grantees***

As noted in the RFT the survey was to be a key measurement tool. A good survey questionnaire can be the source of both quantitative and qualitative information. The surveys in this evaluation consisted mainly of open-ended questions so that respondents could be freer to express their views and provide information. The responses in all these open-ended questions were content analysed.

The number of ESO organisations to have received BEST grants throughout all 3 rounds of the program under consideration, is not large (242) and we therefore sought to obtain data from the whole 'population' - rather than relying on a sample and generalising to the whole population from that sample. The number (242) referred to above included many that had been recipients of grants on more than one occasion. When duplications were removed, the number of ESO's that appeared to have been applicants was 161. To all of these, we sent a survey. This list of ESO's included both those that had been successful in obtaining a grant and those who were unsuccessful.

While we did not expect all of these ESO's to respond, we were very appreciative of those that took the time to complete the questionnaire and return it to us, including

those who had been unsuccessful in their efforts to receive assistance through the program.

We also suggested to the Steering Committee that a second survey, addressed to Department staff involved in the administration of the BEST program would be an additional useful source of information. In the event, we designed and sent out two other surveys – one for BEST Managers in the State offices, and one for Claims Assessors. In each of these cases, we expected to get representative or summary responses rather than a completed survey from every individual working on the BEST program or involved in the assessment of claims.

### ***Organisation Studies***

The BEST Evaluation Steering Committee was keen for us to take a more detailed approach to obtaining information from ESO's where a different or significantly good operation was evident. This was neither a random nor a systematic approach. While, in part, we were looking for examples of what might be called 'good practice' we were also trying to detect where ESO's were trying to be innovative in meeting the various problems that are known to exist with helping veterans in their pursuit of assistance or compensation for military service and consequential trauma. We relied entirely on BEST State Managers to draw to our attention organisations that might be subject to more detailed questioning.

We visited some of these operations, and talked at length on the phone to the managers of others. In all cases we found that there were many different approaches being taken and from these some useful ideas emerged.

### ***Focus group consultation with State grants administrators and State grantee representatives***

Focus groups are a very economic and quick way of collecting responses from a group of people, and we conducted one of these, with the Department's assistance, in each of the Australian States and Territories except the Northern Territory.

We held these focus groups early in the evaluation timetable, in order to get an early appreciation of the issues that were uppermost in people's minds about the value of the BEST program and where there might be scope for improving its efficiency and cost effectiveness.

### ***Data collection in relation to claim processing***

It seems evident to us that an evaluation of a program designed to facilitate and expedite the claims processes, cannot be fully evaluated without reference in some way to the claims process itself. But, of course, an evaluation of the claims process is

an entirely different task – and indeed a larger one that has already, in part, been addressed by the ANAO review. To collect some data that reflected in some way the positive impact of the BEST Grant Program on the processing and outcomes of primary claims (and reviews, except that the latter may be even more difficult to trace), seemed to us to be a useful if not necessary part of forming a sound conclusion about the efficacy of the BEST Grant Program. Hence some incursions were made into the area of claims assessment.

### ***Independent submissions***

Some unsolicited submissions were made. These were carefully prepared and helpfully presented. Their contribution was very much appreciated and formed a valued part of the evaluation. We acknowledge the effort that was made by these contributors. It was both helpful in bringing us ‘up to speed’ in understanding how the whole program worked, and useful to find that a number of points that they made were confirmed by the other data that we collected.

### ***Focus on BEST***

The evaluation brief was clear in expressing the requirement as being an evaluation of the BEST program. This has meant necessarily that our enquiries and this report is very much focussed on the BEST program, even though it is clear that BEST and TIP are joint components of the support service that the government, through the Department, offers to ESO’s.

In the previous evaluation of the forerunner to BEST, ie CAGS, the evaluation did in fact include both programs, ie CAGS and TIP.

It was evident to the evaluators from the responses they obtained to the questions in the ESO survey, that in the minds of many, if not all, ESO personnel, the two programs are inseparable, each providing support. The answers to some of the survey questions are probably (technically) confounded because the answers provided logically, and even quite explicitly relate to TIP rather than to BEST.

Little more needs to be said on the point, except to reinforce the obvious point that TIP and BEST and accompanying programs of assistance to ESO’s in order to help them service, support and represent veterans and their dependents.

# EVALUATION RESULTS

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The results presented in this report are a combination of subjective interpretation and objective data collection. The evaluators used rational analysis of key program statements, relevant documents, focus group information and their own perception of program activities to assess the purpose, efficiency and cost effectiveness of the program.

## **Survey of stakeholders**

### *BEST program applicants survey*

A copy of this survey is at Attachment A

One hundred and sixty one surveys were distributed to a list of BEST Program applicants from each of the completed three rounds of the program to that date. The fourth round occurred while the evaluation was under way, but was too late to be included in the evaluation. Eighty completed survey questionnaires (50%) had been completed at the time the evaluators needed to close off and analyse the data. The list of ESO organisations to which the survey was sent included both successful and unsuccessful applicants.

It was hoped that unsuccessful applicants would respond, even though they might be less inclined to do so than those who had received funding. In the event, a number of unsuccessful organisations did reply. A breakdown of these unsuccessful applicants is shown in the following table.

**Table 1: Analysis of ESO respondents who were unsuccessful in their BEST funding applications**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Number of ESO's</b>
Unsuccessful in at least 1 application	13
Unsuccessful on 2 occasions	5
Unsuccessful on only 1 occasion	6
Unsuccessful on 3 occasions	1
Had <u>only</u> unsuccessful applications	8

We have not been able to determine whether this distribution of unsuccessful applications is representative and typical of all unsuccessful ESO applicants. It would be possible, however, to obtain and analyse the data from each of the 4 rounds of the BEST program to date.

#### ***BEST Program Managers survey***

A copy of this survey is at Attachment B.

This survey was distributed to the BEST Manager in each State/Territory office of DVA. The evaluators had already met and talked with these people in each of the States and in Tasmania. Survey questionnaires, however, were expected to systematise their explanations. Completed questionnaires were received from NSW, QLD, WA and Vic only.

#### ***DVA Claims Assessor survey***

A copy of this survey is at Attachment C.

The survey was distributed to the Director of Compensation in each State/Territory office with the request that Claims Assessors respond to the survey either as a group or as individuals. The questionnaire was deliberately short and very much focussed on the quality of primary claims and the impact that BEST funding might have had or be expected to have on the quality of these claims being made at the primary level.

The respondent profile for Claims Assessors was as follows:

Table 2: Numbers of Claims Assessors responding to the BEST program survey

State Office	No responding
NSW	4
Vic	2
SA	1

It was disappointing that Claims Assessor responses were not obtained from all States and Territories where the BEST program is managed and where Claims Assessors operate. Their comments would have been very important to a balanced evaluation. The comments of Claims Assessors are particularly relevant to the issue of quality of primary claims.

The data from each of these surveys is presented where relevant under the various topics that were investigated as part of the evaluation.

## Key Program Statements

The starting point for the evaluation was an examination of the key program statements for the BEST program. This was because in our view the logic of performance evaluation demands that a program's purpose is taken as the foundation for examining how it has performed. There also is a precedent for this approach in the work of the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (SCRCSPP), which has stated:

*The Steering Committee for the Review defines performance as how well a service meets its objectives, recognising the influence of external factors. (SCRCSPP, 2000, vol 1, p1)*

This Steering Committee went on to discuss reasons for measuring the comparative performance of government services, noting that:

*Such services are important to the community and absorb significant government expenditure, so government should be accountable for the performance of their services.*

The key program statements for the BEST program are located in the Program Guidelines, and presumably these in turn derive from budget papers.

### Program Aim and objectives

The aim of the BEST program is stated as being:

*to provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers. (Program Guidelines 1.2a)*

This aim has been partly operationalised in the form of some objectives. The stated objectives of the Program are to:

1. *Improve the quality of the claims received at the primary determining level and assist ESO's in achieving this objective;*
2. *Reduce the rate of appeals to the Veterans' Review Board (VRB);*
3. *Promote the use of electronic lodgement of claims; and*
4. *Promote the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants.*

There are no performance indicators though. Hence the objective assessment of the Program's performance in relation to these objectives could not be undertaken in the simple, straightforward manner that is possible when performance indicators and standards are set and documented. To this discussion we return later. In the absence of performance indicators, other approaches have to be developed in order to assess, as objectively as possible, whether the program's performance measures up to expectations.

### **Outcomes**

Outcomes have also been enunciated for the Program, as follows:

*This program will produce the following outcomes:*

- *Veterans and their dependants will benefit by having better informed ESO practitioners who can ensure claims lodged with the Department are of a high standard;*
- *The claims submitted will contain all the information required to make timely and quality decisions;*
- *ESO's will assist the Department in improving its claims proficiency; and*
- *ESO's will be assisted in developing the appropriate infrastructure needed to better service veterans and widows/widowers seeking claims assistance. (Program Guidelines, s 1.3)*

The information obtained in the course of our evaluation, while not unequivocal, points strongly to the fulfilment of each of these outcomes. The extent to which they have been achieved, whether they have been achieved in the most 'efficient and cost-effective' manner and the extent to which BEST funding can be given the credit for any of this is not so easy to establish, but is addressed in the study.

### **Other relevant statements**

While aim, objectives, performance indicators and outcomes have been taken to be the most important basis for evaluating a program, we found many other useful pointers

to program expectations in the Program Guidelines. For example, they indicate that the program will:

*...enable grants in respect of:*

- 1. Full time or part time paid pension/welfare practitioners;*
- 2. Full time or part time paid administrative support staff;*
- 3. Leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences (computers and software); and*
- 4. Consumables, running costs and other purposes relating to the lodgement of claims and appeals (eg travel and office equipment).*

There is no doubt that grants have been made in respect of each of these purposes, but again the question has to be asked as to whether these applications of funding are the most 'efficient and effective' uses to which the money could be put.

We considered also that information provided in the Request For Tender which described the origins of the BEST program, for example:

*BEST replaced the lapsed Claims Assistance Grants Scheme (CAGS) in 1999 and it compliments the Training and Information Program (TIP). TIP was introduced in 1995 to provide training for ESO pension officers, welfare officers and advocates so that they can in turn provide the best possible advice and assistance to veterans and their dependants. The BEST and TIP linkage enables greater integration between training and the provision of infrastructure.*

*Following a review of CAGS and TIP in 1998, the BEST grant program was developed in close consultation with ESO stakeholders. In response to that review, BEST was developed to incorporate a more thorough monitoring of project outcomes.*

*CAGS was a 1996 budget initiative in which DVA funds were allocated over a three year period to resource ESO's to employ additional staff and acquire equipment to assist with the lodgement of primary claims for entitlements under the Veterans Entitlements Act 1986.*

*BEST, like CAGS, provides resources to ESO's to help in the claims process. The Government initially allocated \$5.4m over four years for BEST, commencing in 1999. However, unlike CAGS, BEST is an ongoing project with annual funding of \$1.6m.*

*BEST guidelines require that ESO's undertake the appropriate levels of TIP training (or an acceptable equivalent) prior to funds being granted. The requirement that, both volunteers and paid ESO practitioners undertake TIP training and attend appropriate refresher courses, ensures participants are kept up to date with developments in the Repatriation system and in the use of electronic tools. TIP also provides policy and legislative software and reference manuals to trained practitioners.*

From these statements, the evaluators noted the following critical points:

- *BEST is intended to complement the Training and Information Program (TIP);*
- *The BEST and TIP linkage is intended to enable greater integration between training and the provision of infrastructure;*
- *BEST was developed to incorporate a more thorough monitoring of project outcomes;*
- *BEST is intended to provide resources to ESO's to help in the claims process. Unlike CAGS, BEST is an ongoing project with annual funding (of \$1.6m);*
- *BEST guidelines require that ESO's undertake the appropriate levels of TIP training (or an acceptable equivalent) prior to funds being granted.*

### ***Critique of the key program statements***

This critique relates to the statements themselves, rather than whether the program is fulfilling those statements. Key program statements should provide in themselves a sufficient basis for evaluation.

The evaluators, like previous assessors of the program, believe that the intention behind the program is highly commendable and appropriate. Ex service organisations fulfil an important role in helping veterans and their dependents to access and avail themselves of entitlements that the government and people of Australia believe should be available to those who have made sacrifices and suffered for the well being, protection and future of the country.

Hence the Aim as stated in the Program Guidelines, is entirely appropriate, clear, sufficient and straightforward statement of intent.

The Outcomes, as stated in the Program Guidelines also follow naturally and responsibly from the Aim. In terms of commonly accepted definitions, for example as defined by the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (SCRCSSP), *outcomes refer to the consequences of a service* (SCRCSSP, 2000, p. 9), the outcomes are correctly defined.

There appear to be some problems, however, with the Objectives as currently defined in the Program Guidelines. These problems, in brief, are as follows:

#### ***Improve the quality of the claims received at the primary determining level and assist ESO's in achieving this objective***

We received a large number of informal and formal comments from stakeholders in relation to this objective. It was pointed out, almost relentlessly, that the quality of primary claims depends on a range of factors, many of which rest with the veterans themselves. This seemed to immediately flag for us a definitional problem, and the need to clarify exactly what was wanted. Our unease with this objective was confirmed by the lack of both performance indicators and any regularly collected data

that would provide a basis for determining whether the expected 'improvement in quality' was or was not occurring.

The evaluators recognise that an improvement in the quality of claims at the primary determining level is a highly desirable eventuality, and that the BEST program in concert with TIP can do something to help. It is also clear that it is a legitimate expectation for the Department to have as a consequence of providing funding to ESO's. There needs to be some tangible outcome for the expenditure of taxpayers' money.

Any objective phrased in terms of 'improvement', is of course presuming that there is room for improvement. If there were no room for improvement (a position that would doubtless be contested by those who will say that there will always be room for improvement) then it might be sufficient to say that maintaining the current standard of delivery is an appropriate goal. Although the evaluators did not specifically evaluate the quality of claims at the primary delivery level, it seemed clear from the information we did receive that there is room for improvement. What we are not able to say is precisely where in the process of claims preparation and submission, improvements could be made.

It has been pointed out to us that two factors which have a bearing on the quality of claims are:

- The provision of supporting documentation from qualified medical practitioners who can diagnose the condition(s) experienced by the veteran; and
- The freedom that the veteran has to either submit a claim entirely on their own, or take only part of the advice provided by a practitioner, or indeed insist on going ahead with a claim or claims even when advised by a practitioner that the claim is unlikely to succeed (for sound reasons). This is not just a matter that the veteran is misguided, it may well be the case that the practitioner is incorrect (indeed, the Department is the authority that makes the decision, not the practitioner, and on that ground alone, veterans can legitimately feel that they will always have the right to proceed with a claim - and may well succeed even when a practitioner thinks it unlikely).

It would seem that neither of these two factors could be altered by any amount of BEST funding, and yet they will continue to have an impact on the quality of primary claims.

Since the term 'quality' can be widely interpreted, and is affected by factors outside the control of the Department and beyond influence by BEST funding, it seems clear to us that this objective needs to be either clarified or redefined.

*Reduce the rate of appeals to the Veterans' Review Board (VRB)*

This objective suffers from a similar problem, in that reducing the rate of appeals to the VRB is a complicated matter, and subject to factors largely unrelated to BEST

funding. At face value, this objective seems to be a complement to the first objective. There is an apparent logic to the argument that if the quality of primary claims is raised, this will lead to more successful outcomes for the claimants, and thus there will be fewer appeals to the VRB (or indeed to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal).

Again, the evaluators have had representatives from all stakeholder groups at pains to point that such a causal connection between primary claims and appeals to the VRB is more apparent than real in many cases.

The argument needs to be tested. It could not be tested within the scope of this review, and the evaluators would suggest that it can only be tested by analysing the reasons why veterans or their dependents choose to lodge an appeal and why those hearing the appeal support or reject the appeal. If such an analysis were to reveal that the quality of most primary claims is deficient and that had the practitioners concerned done a 'better' job, then the claims may in all probability have succeeded, then the connection between the quality of primary claims and the rate of appeals would be more apparent.

With the information that we currently have available, it is very unclear whether there is a relationship between the quality of primary claims and subsequent rates of appeal. It is therefore also quite unclear as to whether the uses to which BEST funding is put in most ESO's, can/should be expected to have an impact on whether a veteran (or dependent) chooses to take their case to the VRB.

Again, it is widely acknowledged that with appeals, as with primary claims, the veteran (or dependent) has the option to take or leave the advice which may be offered by an advocate who may feel that the claimant's case has little chance of success, given the requirements laid down in legislation and other documentation such as the Statements of Principle.

While it might be hoped, for many good reasons, that the rate of appeals might reduce, it seems, at best, that BEST funding to achieve this purpose is likely to be indirect.

#### *Promote the use of electronic lodgement of claims*

This third objective has a different set of problems. While it fits the aim of *providing support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers*, and feeds directly into the outcome that *ESO's will assist the Department in improving its claims proficiency*, it relates to a function that simply is not yet available. We understand that it is only now at a point of development for pilot testing.

Our survey results, and discussions with stakeholders, have revealed that there is considerable confusion as to what is meant by 'electronic lodgement of claims' and the perception by some that it would do little to help veterans, or their representatives make a claim that is any better or more timely. Indeed some practitioners have argued

that it could detract from the process of assisting a veteran in gathering his/her thoughts and data for the claim.

One could also quibble about the use of the term 'promote' in this objective, since it is probably not the promotion of electronic lodgement that is at issue, but whether electronic lodgement is possible, secure and user friendly.

*Promote the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants.*

To the evaluators' knowledge no funding has been provided to an ESO under the BEST program explicitly for 'the provision of welfare services'. At the same time pensions advice and advocacy work are themselves 'welfare services', and in the conduct of practitioner work, welfare-type activities are often conducted. It seems there is an implicit acknowledgement by both the Department and ESO representatives that this too is an ill-defined objective, to the point of being meaningless.

This is not to say that the Department does not value the welfare work undertaken by ESO's. Rather it is acknowledged that a good deal of welfare work is done by ESO's, funded in the main from other sources, and this provision of welfare services is highly commended. The difficulty is in defining welfare in this context so that it is both tangible and manageable, given that so many things that could occur in the life of an ESO would be in the nature of welfare services. So long as it is unclear, and there are insufficient funds to support every application, welfare funding will probably continue to receive less support that ESOs might hope for.

### ***Improving key program statements***

The evaluators have noted the statement in the 'Request for Tender' that *BEST was developed to incorporate a more thorough monitoring of project outcomes*. We have not only found little evidence that this monitoring has taken place, we feel that while the objectives, as stated in the Program Guidelines, remain in their present form, this 'more thorough monitoring' cannot easily occur.

Performance indicators are normally closely linked to objectives (or outcomes), since that is their purpose: to show whether objectives are being achieved. We maintain that the objectives should be rewritten to eliminate as much uncertainty of meaning as possible and to make it possible to define clear performance indicators. This, in turn, will both make the purposes of the program more transparent, and enable a more thorough monitoring of project outcomes to be set in place.

The statement of good objectives and performance indicators is not a simple and easy task, and we did not see it as our responsibility to provide alternative wording. Some suggested re-wording of objectives and performance indicators, however, is presented in the following Tables.

**Table 3: Possible objectives to match aim and outcomes stated in BEST Program Guidelines**

Aim	Objectives	Outcomes
<p>To provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers.</p>	<p>To provide resources that supplement TIP training and equip ESO practitioners to provide an advisory service to veterans and their dependents resulting in up-to-date, accurate and fully supported claims.</p>	<p>Veterans and their dependants will benefit by having better informed ESO practitioners who can ensure claims lodged with the Department are of a high standard;</p>
	<p>To provide ESO's with quality access to relevant information and guidelines on how to find and collate it for improved claims processes.</p>	<p>The claims submitted will contain all the information required to make timely and quality decisions;</p>
	<p>To establish and refine mechanisms that will enhance the interchange of information between ESO practitioners and the Department.</p>	<p>ESO's will assist the Department in improving its claims proficiency;</p>
	<p>To provide resources, assist and encourage ESO's to develop effective and efficient infrastructures to better service veterans and dependents seeking claims assistance</p>	<p>ESO's will be assisted in developing the appropriate infrastructure needed to better service veterans and widows/widowers seeking claims assistance.</p>

## Performance Indicators

If, as we understand to be the case, part of the intention, following the review of CAGS and TIP in 1998, was to *incorporate a more thorough monitoring of project outcomes*, then consideration needs to be given to defining some performance indicators for the program.

The cardinal features of performance indicators are that:

- They should be valid – that is they should be true indicators of what it is that they purport to be indicating. The more valid, the better, though it is not always possible to get indicators that are ideally valid and measurable (which is the second requirement).
- They should be quantifiable. Many outcomes, because they are general statements of attitude or well being, cannot be directly quantified. Such outcomes have to be assumed or inferred from other variables that partly represent the outcome in question, but can at least be measured. A performance indicator that cannot be quantified is of little or no value as an indicator.

Hence, for the BEST program, the current lack of performance indicators should be rectified so that the program and its performance can be open to critical inspection. There are performance objectives to be specified for each successful ESO by the funding organisation, but these do not appear to be collated and integrated into any kind of overall program performance monitoring.

For each of the BEST program's objectives, there should be indicators of performance which are valid and measurable and are measured and assessed each year. An attempt at producing some indicators, in the light of our understanding of the program, has been made in the table on the following page.

To have an indicator is still only part of the requirement, since the value that comes from measuring it, needs to be compared with a level or standard which is taken to be an acceptable level or the goal to which the program is aspiring. To have a measurement and no standard for comparison is of no use for making an assessment. It can only be assessed as good, average or poor when compared with a predetermined level of the same measurement. Five metres is a short distance compared with 20 metres, but long when compared with half a metre.

Hence in this case, to be thoroughly objective about the assessment of the BEST program, it is desirable to have clearly enunciated objectives, indicators which can be measured and which are taken to be valid indicators of the functions or activities embodied in the objectives, and finally a standard against which to compare the performance indicator measurement.

The following performance indicators are not offered as exemplars of performance indicator wording. They are offered as suggestions for how specific quantifiable indicators could be developed from the suggested objectives.

**Table 4: Hypothetical suggestions of performance indicators that could arise from objectives suggested in the previous table**

Objectives	Performance indicators
To provide resources that supplement TIP training and equip ESO practitioners to provide an advisory service to veterans and their dependents resulting in up-to-date, accurate and fully supported claims	Quantify the extent to which named resources will be shared among ESO's (according to specified funding strategies); Describe the geographical cover aimed at for ESO assistance. Describe targets ratios for fully acceptable claims submitted by ESO's (where acceptability relates to elements under the practitioner's control)
To provide ESO's with quality access to relevant information and guidelines on how to find and collate it for improved claims processes.	Indicators could relate to the type and extent of computer resources (and how provided), Internet access
To establish and refine mechanisms that will enhance the interchange of information between ESO practitioners and the Department.	Quantify electronic lodgement pilot; Describe and quantify ESO performance indicators; Describe and quantify aimed-for feedback mechanisms and processes.
To provide resources, assist and encourage ESO's to develop effective and efficient infrastructures to better service veterans and dependents seeking claims assistance	Need to identify infrastructure elements that will be encouraged and quantify targets.

## Achievement of aim and objectives

As noted earlier, the stated aim is

*To provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers.*

Whether the program is achieving this aim was taken by the evaluators to be the most critical question. It was approached from two directions:

1. Is there evidence that the stated aim (objectives and outcome) is being achieved?
2. Is there other evidence that may not be directly related to the objectives as stated but can nevertheless be taken to show that the performance of the program is satisfactory?

Evidence on point 1 is presented here. The second point is taken up later in this report.

In order to determine first, whether ESO organisations perceived the BEST program to be fulfilling its aim, the direct question was asked of respondents in the BEST program applicants' survey (hereafter referred to as the ESO survey). An identical question appears also in both the BEST Managers' survey and the Claims Assessors' survey. The results from all three surveys are as follows:

**Table 5: Respondents views about the extent to which the BEST program is achieving its aim**

Options	No of ESO's	No of BEST mgrs	No of Claims A'ssors
BEST's aim is being achieved to an outstanding degree	5 (6%)		
BEST's aim is being achieved to a very high degree	30 (38%)		1 (rated 2.5)
BEST's aim is being achieved to a high degree	29 (36%)	4	3
BEST's aim is being achieved to a poor degree	6 (8%)		2
BEST's aim is being achieved to a very poor degree	1 (1%)		
BEST's aim is being achieved to an outstandingly poor degree			
<i>Average rating</i>	2.5	3	3.25
Not in a position to make this judgment	5		
No response	4	5	
<i>Total</i>	80		

Both BEST Managers and Claims Assessors rated it as less successful in achieving its aim than BEST funding applicants whose average rating was 2.5, but only marginally so.

The BEST program was introduced to replace the former Claims Assistance Grants Scheme (CAGS). A part of the requirements for this evaluation was to *determine if BEST has been a positive replacement for CAGS*. Accordingly, we asked ESO respondents, Best Managers and Claims Assessors for a comparative rating. Many respondents had not experienced the CAGS program and therefore were not in a position to make this comparison.

**Table 6: ESO respondent views about the BEST program when compared with the predecessor CAGS program**

<b>Options</b>	<b>Number</b>
Better than CAGS (a program in operation before BEST)	21 (26%)
About the same as CAGS	13 (16%)
Not as good as CAGS	5 (6%)
Filling a different role entirely, can't compare them	6 (8%)
Had no experience of CAGS	32 (40%)
No response	3 (4%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>

As can be seen from the table above, nearly half of all ESO respondents (40%) said they had had no experience of CAGS. Of the remainder, nearly half (26%) believe that BEST is better than CAGS, but an almost equal number (24%) thought the two programs were about the same or that BEST was not as good as CAGS.

Of our BEST Manager respondents, one considered the two programs to be filling different roles entirely, one considered it better than CAGS, and the other two thought it not as good as CAGS.

Only two of the Claims Assessors answered from a position of knowing both programs and both considered them about the same as each other.

The evaluators similarly have no experience of CAGS, and suspect that this outcome may be a little disappointing for those who have designed and implemented the BEST program with the intention of having it fulfil its role in a better way than CAGS.

***Application of funding monies***

Continuing to seek evidence about whether the aim of the program was being fulfilled, the evaluators turned to that part of the aim that refers to *support and resources*. Respondents were asked to indicate what they had been funded for and

what they found to have been most useful. The following table shows what the respondents said they had been funded for. (This information could, of course, have been obtained directly from the Department records and was not asked here for any reason other than to have the questionnaire make as much sense as possible to the ESO respondents.) The question asked: If you have been funded under BEST, what were you funded for? (*tick as many as necessary*).

**Table 7: Breakdown of purposes for which respondents said they were funded**

<b>Options</b>	<b>Number</b>
Full time or part time paid pension/welfare/advocate-practitioners	14 (10%)
Full time or part time paid administrative support staff	22 (16%)
Leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences	54 (39%)
Consumables etc.	41 (29%)
Other (please describe)	6 (4%)
No response	2 (1%)
<i>Totals</i>	139

Note: Total number of responses is higher than the number of respondents because more than one response was permitted in this question.

The results for the ensuing question about usefulness were as follows:

**Table 8: BEST funding applications said to be most useful by ESO respondents (sorted from items receiving most choices to least)**

<b>Options</b>	<b>No. selecting option as most useful</b>
Leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences	30 (31%)
Consumables etc.	18 (19%)
Full time or part time paid administrative support staff	16 (16%)
Full time or part time paid pension/welfare/advocate practitioners	14 (14%)
No response	19 (20%)
<i>Total</i>	(97)

Note: The total exceeds the total number of respondents because some respondents ranked two or more options equally most useful.

**Table 9: Second most-useful applications of BEST funding (sorted from items receiving most choices to least)**

Options	No. selecting option as next most useful
Leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences	18 (2%)
Consumables etc.	11 (14%)
Full time or part time paid administrative support staff	7 (9%)
Full- or part-time paid pension/welfare/advocate practitioners	2 (3%)
No response	47 (58%)
<i>Total</i> *	85

\* NB Some respondents marked two or more items as equally 'next most useful'

Since some of the ESO respondents had been unsuccessful in obtaining a grant, these respondents were asked which of the possible options for funding they felt they most needed in order to do their work more effectively and efficiently?

**Table 10: BEST funding application considered to be the most useful by applicants who had not been successful in obtaining a grant**

Options	Number selecting this option
Full time or part time paid pension/welfare/advocate-practitioners	4 (17%)
Full time or part time paid administrative support staff	4 (17%)
Leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences*	8 (33%)
Consumables etc.	8 (33%)
Other (please describe)	0
<i>Total</i>	24

\* The words 'electronic form lodgement licences' were retained in the question because the Program Guidelines refer to them in the same sentence as leased computers.

The results of all of these questions indicate that *leased computers (and electronic lodgement form licences)* were both most commonly obtained by respondents under the BEST program and were considered most useful, followed by consumables. There may, of course, be some artificiality in this response pattern, since the Department has a say in both what can be requested, and which applications are successful.

The following table shows, in contrast to the above information, how the funds were actually allocated across funding categories in Round 3.

**Table 11: Summary of actual BEST program fund allocation across funding categories in round 3 (2001)**

Funding category	NSW	QLD	VIC	SA	WA	TAS
Pension						
Off/Advocate salaries	63%	46%	27%	73%	2%	58%
Administrative	2%	16%	52%	0%	76%	0%
Consumables & other costs	22%	19%	6%	13%	9%	27%
Equipment costs	12%	18%	15%	14%	13%	14%

It is difficult to be confident in interpreting some of these data. There is an apparent discrepancy between what the ESO respondents believed they were funded for and saw as most useful, and the actual funding allocation. The difference we suspect is that the questions in the ESO survey about funding did not ask about dollar value, but simply, *what were you funded for?* The table immediately above is about actual dollar value.

This difference serves to highlight an important aspect of funding under the BEST scheme. The cost of providing personnel is significantly higher than providing equipment. Hence the funding available can go further on equipment. But this may simply need to be accepted if improvements are to be made to the program, because there is a limit to how much improvement in effectiveness and efficiency can be achieved through the supply of equipment.

The table above is also useful in showing the relative proportions of funding in round 3 (which we have taken to be typical) between staff and other items, which condensed is as follows:

**Table 12: Ratios of staff expenditure to other expenditure, by State, in round 3 of the BEST funding program**

State	Ratio of percentages
NSW	65% : 34%
QLD	62% : 32%
VIC	79% : 21%
WA	78% : 22%
SA	73% : 27%
TAS	58% : 41%

When the staffing percentages are merged, there is not a big discrepancy across States (except in Tasmania), but when the staff percentages are treated separately- pensions officers/advocates compared with administrative staff, there is much greater variation between States.

From their experience in evaluating other human service programs, the evaluators have found that the largest proportion of expenditure in a human service program is on paid professionals or semi-professional staff, administrators and, if volunteers are involved, then also in a paid coordinator for the volunteers. A study of a volunteer program in South Australia, for example, showed that for every 35 volunteers in a human service agency, one full time coordinator of volunteers was required. This was to provide supervision, manage the records, deploy and roster, organise training, deal with crises, discipline, trouble-shooting etc.

While human service agencies do spend money on consumables, rent, travel, telephone, postage, and stationery and from time to time have a need for capital equipment, by far the greatest need for funds is in the area of people to talk to and listen to people. The quality of the service provided by the people in the human service sector is not primarily due to the intelligence of the agency's machines, but the professional skill and expertise of its personnel. These costs, including on-costs (super, leave loadings, insurance, staff development, etc), can be as high as 80% to 85% of total expenditure."

In round 3 the total proportion of BEST grants for personnel in all States was 70% and the remaining 30% was spent on equipment and other services. This statistic seems to reinforce the need now to alter the funding strategy in the BEST program, to be less on equipment and more on staffing assistance.

This might be achieved in one of two ways: leave the current level for equipment where it is and obtain a higher level of funding to permit support for staff; or reduce the amount apportioned to equipment to allow more for expenditure on staff. Any changes

The comment was made by a number of ESO's that the salary limits imposed on staff under BEST funding was unrealistically low. We have not been able to research this but can make the observation that if these limits are raised or raised too much, this would again eat into the available funds and make it difficult for other ESO's to succeed in their applications for grants.

### ***The provision of computer equipment***

In general, the evaluators have noted that the provision of computers and computer-related equipment by the government has been well received and treated as a valuable aid to the work of pension claims assistance. Some issues, however, have been raised. We therefore sought some clarification in the ESO survey by asking:

'Which aspects of the equipment provision do you feel need to be changed to make the provision more effective and efficient?' ESO respondent replies were as follows:

- 19 ESO's (23.75%) indicated that they required no changes to the equipment provision to make it more efficient and effective. They used such terms as "more than satisfied", "very happy", "no adverse comments", "most adequate", "system is working well" and "completely satisfied with current arrangements."
- 20 ESO's (25%) indicated they needed more equipment to do their work more effectively and efficiently. The main demand was for additional computers (8 agencies); the next demand was for scanners and one agency had not received any equipment at all. Two agencies said that their work would be much more effective if laptops were available to all of their sub-branches, but acknowledged that this might be wishful thinking.

The following is a list of equipment mentioned by these respondents as desirable for more effective and efficient work:

- Photocopiers,
- Back-up maintenance,
- Additional computers (mainly laptops for portability) to reduce annual report paperwork,
- Flat bed scanners,
- Printers,
- Photocopier,
- Communication equipment,
- All equipment - we have not received any,
- Consumables,
- Anti-virus program with the initial supply of equipment and an allocation of funds for annual updating of anti-virus data.

However, 26 (32.5%) ESO respondents expressed the view that changes were needed to the equipment provision processes. Their main concerns centred around the need to upgrade aging equipment (7 agencies) – the long delays in leasing companies providing the equipment (3 agencies), the difficulties of gaining Internet access, particularly in remote areas (3 agencies) and 3 agencies wanted the leasing system to be replaced by ESO's purchasing their own equipment. There were also a few concerns about getting reliable maintenance of equipment, and more adequate review of under-utilisation of equipment in the States. A complete list of systems concerns may be found below:

**Table 13: Computer and equipment-related issues raised by ESO respondents**

- 
- Internet provision (broadband) and costs need to be reviewed;
  - Upgrading of equipment;
  - Networking;
  - Earlier access to the equipment (some agencies waiting 6 months);
  - Replacement of leased systems with purchased hardware;
  - Provision of a maintenance provider or funding for same;
  - Computer and office equipment that was procured with a CAGS grant and is not eligible for maintenance under BEST;
  - Delivery and configuration of equipment needs to be tailored to the recipient;
  - Equipment should be available for more than just processing primary claims;
  - All grant recipients should be provided with basic equipment (computer,
-

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*printer, scanner);*

- *Leasing of equipment in country areas from local firms;*
  - *Funding for consumables;*
  - *Ongoing update of computer programs;*
  - *Review of the leasing arrangement;*
  - *Review by State TIP's of use of equipment by ESO's re under- utilisation;*
  - *Application for equipment to be made easier. Present system is complex and irrelevant;*
  - *Equipment providers in State capitals means unacceptable repair turn around time.*
- 

BEST Managers' were asked for suggestions for making this part of BEST assistance more effective and more efficient (including cost-efficient). Their responses were:

- *Realistic funding to promote and enhance the work being done. The ever-increasing leasing cost makes a great hole in available funding. Help Desk support has been, to say the least, inadequate. Salaries are too little, especially once Agency costs are deducted so retaining/obtaining good quality staff has been difficult. We have not been able to afford other equipment eg photocopiers etc.*
- *Current leasehold arrangements are very cumbersome and the need to re-apply each year is inconvenient and costly. Purchase of the equipment would negate the high admin cost of these annual rounds. It was in this area that CAGS was a better program.*
- *Delivery of equipment - often slow - do not receive equipment for several months (one not till Jan); Leased equipment - purpose recognised - can provide more equipment in the first instance - but does create problems - seems to be problems with equipment deemed 'out of warranty'. If organisation purchased, would know these dates etc. Cannot always solve problems through 'help desk'. Suggestion: purchased equipment using specification provided by DVA.*
- *As this is the most common type of funding, computers should have been purchased outright. While this may have resulted in fewer grants in the first instance, there would be less continued funding issues that occurred in subsequent rounds. This would have also been more efficient for grant monitoring where the organisation would not have to report for more than the year of the grant/ less applications each round from these orgs/ more orgs 'set up'/the ESO's would not feel each round that their grant was in jeopardy. There have been significant issues with computer provider including significant delay which could have been avoided.*

It has to be recognised that the availability of computer equipment, or more specifically Internet access, has been, and is, a central feature of the support provision under BEST. Internet access means that practitioners can access crucial information for the preparation of claims at the primary level, and also for preparing appeals. A computer-competent, experienced and conscientious practitioner is inevitably going to be more up-to-date with information from the Department, and more able to access timely information of assistance of relevance to veterans and their dependents in preparing claims and appeals.

It was very clear to the evaluators, however, from all sources, that the supply of computer and related hardware and software was a difficult and problematic part of the program. This is particularly so, when the implications of the leasing arrangements for the availability of funds to 'new' ESO's and support centres, is considered. To this point we return later.

At this point of the report, we note that there is sufficient disquiet with the current approach to warrant a serious look at other approaches to providing this otherwise very beneficial support and resource provision.

### ***Impact of BEST on the quality of primary claims***

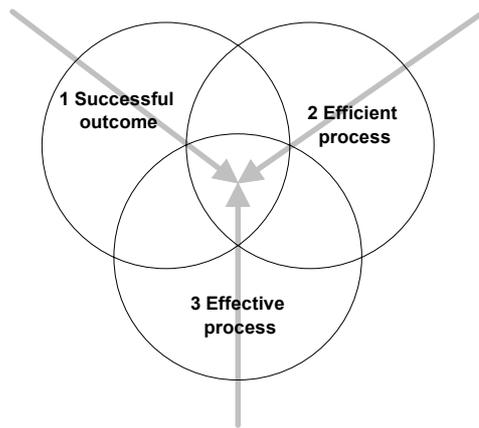
Since the aim of the BEST program is 'operationalised' in the statement of objectives, the evaluators sought evidence that the objectives stated in the Program Guidelines were being achieved. Despite the critique of key program statements, especially objectives, offered in an earlier section of this report, the evaluators considered it essential to seek evidence on whether the stated objectives were being met, since presumably these would be what stakeholders have in their minds as the primary reasons for having the grants.

The first of these objectives, as indicated earlier, is to *improve the quality of the claims received at the primary determining level and assist ESO's in achieving this objective.*

In order to determine whether the BEST program is achieving this objective, it is necessary to:

1. Understand what is meant by 'quality of claims';
2. Analyse what things contribute to this;
3. Clarify how the application of BEST funding does or might have an impact on these contributory factors; and
4. Obtain information that would allow us to form a judgement as to whether BEST funding was having the desired effect.

The quality of claims may be interpreted from many different perspectives. A perhaps over-simplified representation of three perspectives of relevance appears in the following figure.



**Figure 1: Different ways of looking at quality**

For a veteran or veteran’s dependent, the primary focus when thinking about the quality of a claim may be to do with its successful outcome for them. Both efficiency and/or effectiveness may dominate the perception of quality if one is a claims assessor or a practitioner.

It is conceivable that elements of the process of making a claim may be very poor, inefficient and poorly presented and yet the claim could be successful because the underlying facts support a reasonable hypothesis that the claimant’s current state was due to war service. Equally it may be possible, at least in theory, for an extremely well presented and argued claim to fail because the fundamental case being made is flawed.

Bearing in mind both the spirit and the letter of the Veterans Entitlement Act (VEA), a quality claim would be one that is well argued, well supported, and well presented, even if the eventual claim is rejected since the process has given a veteran the possibility and opportunity of making the claim, but has not consumed excessive resources in reaching that decision. The veteran concerned could at least be satisfied that his/her case has been properly presented and heard.

As argued earlier in this report, improved and improving ‘quality’ of claims at the primary level is a legitimate interest for the Department, and should be of interest to both practitioners and veterans, since with improved quality the probability of a successful and satisfying outcome for veterans is increased.

But it seems clear to the evaluators that the term ‘quality’ has not been adequately defined and is variously understood by different stakeholders. The term ‘quality’ in this context may be problematic unless it is either defined or replaced by a term(s) that is understood.

In order to make the point, the evaluators have attempted to analyse what is meant and what is intended by referring to quality in the objectives for the program. We are not claiming that this analysis is complete, nor do we see it as necessarily accurate. It is presented from our position of limited experience and understanding. We trust, however, that the analysis makes the point.

The analysis is also made with a particular application in mind. That is, we are seeking to clarify which elements of what is intended by 'quality' could be influenced by the Department through BEST funding (or other resources and support). Part of the rationale for doing this, is that it is pointless setting objectives over which the program can have no influence. It is clearly the case, as numerous people said to us, that there are aspects of veteran activity and behaviour over which the BEST program has virtually no control and impact. At the same time, a convincing argument can be presented that the quality of supporting evidence, and the quality of the argument presented must be influenced in a positive direction by making information, resources, SOPs and previous rulings made easily available to those making a claim. In our opinion, therefore, it is important to tease these out and make the objectives of the program more focussed.

The following is presented with only practitioners in mind, since it is they through their ESO's that are the direct beneficiaries of the BEST grants.

**Table 14: Elements of quality in claims and degree of direct influence that DVA can have on the level of quality**

<b>Element</b>	<b>Meaning?</b>	<b>Extent to which the element might be influenced by strategic funding under BEST</b>
<u>Presentation</u> elements	Claim forms are completed properly and legibly, fulfil the requirements for submitting a claim, are timely, confidentially and securely handled.	Practitioners have a major role to play here when representing or advising a veteran or dependent. Presentation elements do not require a high degree of skill. Good administration is the key, along with feedback from the Department. TIP provides training input, which presumably is relevant and helpful. The BEST program also can influence administration and process by resourcing administrative support personnel. If electronic lodgement is introduced it too could be expected to have an important part to play in this element.
<u>'Support'</u> elements	All relevant supporting information that the claimant needs to present, is obtained from appropriately qualified people and sources, and presented in a manner that can be handled effectively and efficiently	Practitioners have a significant advisory role, and may also be required to ensure that the veteran carries through with appointments. A significant role remains with the veteran to provide accurate information. Again DVA could influence Practitioners in their advisory role (TIP). It can/does provide relevant information, and in some cases is in the best position to obtain relevant information. BEST helps through giving access to information (computers, Internet etc) BEST might also help by funding the purchase of scanners/copiers etc
<u>'Case'</u>	A contention is made that	The 'human' factor is a key one here. It requires

elements	the information presented meets the eligibility requirements, and establishes an adequate basis for the level of benefit or service to be granted.	familiarity and experience. It also requires knowledge of the VEA, of SOPs, of what constitutes a reasonable hypothesis, and an awareness of what is likely to be regarded as a frivolous claim (or appeal). TIP training again is important, as is a good feedback channel. BEST's role here is important in giving practitioners access to relevant information and case histories.
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We hope that it is clear from this table, that some elements of the claim process are much more able than others, to be influenced through the application of funding, training and other support resources.

To obtain data that would both confirm our analysis of what quality actually meant in this context, and to assess whether the BEST funding program is leading to an improvement in quality, ESO respondents were asked directly whether BEST funding had resulted in an improvement in quality of primary claims.

(It is acknowledged that this is a leading question for recipients of funding since they have a vested interest in the continuation of the funding. Their responses need, therefore, to be read along with the responses to the same question from BEST Managers and Claims Assessors.)

**Table 15: ESO Respondents views on whether BEST funding had resulted in an improvement in the quality of primary claims**

<b>Types of response</b>	<b>No.</b>
Yes* See table below	54 (67.5%)
No** See subsequent table below	6 (7.5%)
No Response	11 (14%)
Don't know	3 (4%)
Not applicable	1 (1%)
Yes – but no reasons given	1 (1%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>76</i>

An explanation for any improvement was also sought in the survey. The ways in which ESO respondents believed this improvement had occurred are outlined below. Since some ESO's gave more than one reason for the improvement, the responses have been aggregated and ranked in order of frequency of mention.

It can be readily seen that a number of the explanations given are not directly attributable to BEST funding but rather a part of the Department's general strategies for assisting veterans and improving the quality of primary claims – showing again the close relationship between BEST and TIP and other provisions.

Since our focus is on the BEST funding program and its impact on the improvement of claims at the primary level, this distinction is an important one, and reduces the apparent positive impact of the program somewhat.

**Table 16: Explanations given by ESO respondents for the perceived improvement in primary claims because of BEST funding**

Type of explanation*	No. of times mentioned
Statements of Principles made it better	12
F/T and P/T Pension Officers and Advocates	10
Electronic equipment and peripherals	10
Training by TIP	9
Access to useful & timely information	7
Consolidated Library of Information & Knowledge (CLIK) & Repatriation Medical Authority (RMA) Home Pages	6
Access to Internet (unspecified)	5
Compensation Claims Processing System (CCPS)	4
Administrative Support	3
Access to DVA Forms	3
Military Compensation & Rehabilitation Service (MCRS); More comprehensive reporting; In house training	2
Office expenses; MERCK Manual (drug); Interaction between trained advocates; Centralisation of Resources; Direct Referrals; Identification of Claims; Email and documentation; Computer Programs Available; Generating letters of support; travel costs.	1

Six ESO's (7.50%) said that there had been no improvement in the quality of primary claims since the BEST grant and their reasons are set out below:

**Table 17: Reasons given by ESO respondents for thinking that there has been no improvement in the quality of primary claims as a result of BEST funding**

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\*\*Previously high standard of our primary claims has not improved due to our small BEST grant.  
 The quality of claims submitted, and their success rate has been very high and consistent (from the outset).  
 Not in quality but vast improvement in recording and data files.  
 Not in quality but yes in relation to training.  
 Claims are still manually completed and forwarded by post.  
 Noticed no variation.

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\*\* This ESO is saying that they have always been submitting high quality claims and the small grant they got from the BEST program could not be expected to improve the quality.

BEST Managers were a little more convinced of the positive impact of BEST funding on the quality of primary claims. Three of the 4 manager respondents said that ESO's

were definitely able to do a better job while one couldn't be positive one way or the other.

The differences that BEST Managers had noticed in funded ESO's (and which they believed could be attributed to the funding) included the following:

- *Because of the expansion of the Regional Centres the additional work has put a great deal of pressure on the volunteers (paperwork) and the requirement for Admin Support Officers has increased. There are those who are now struggling because funding does not allow the employment of these officers. Other organisations who readily assist with claims are crying out for admin support but there is no funding.*
- *The funding of ESO's has certainly assisted them with their claims handling activities, whether it be accessing research material, having a paid officer available to perform the admin tasks, or having the admin infrastructure support to complete the tasks involved.*
- *More awareness of information available from DVA through Internet and use of CLIK - using BEST computers. More attendances at TIP training.*
- *I can't really be positive. I have noticed an increased awareness of DVA benefits, resources available to ESO's, increased interaction with the Department amongst those organisations who have received funding. There appears to be a greater level of advice provided to veterans through utilisation of computers etc funded under BEST.*

By way of supporting evidence of a slightly different kind, we asked BEST Managers whether they considered that ESO's, which had not been successful in getting a grant, were having difficulty or would improve the quality of their primary claim activity if they did receive a grant. A sample of relevant comments follows:

- *A few organisations who have not received BEST funding or have not received addition funding due to the constraints of BEST are in difficulty. This is affecting their relationship with DVA as they perceive the system as unfair. They too provide quality claims outcomes but cannot get funding.*
- *Yes, because they do not always have the same access to required information and support.*
- *Yes, but not regular users of TIP training.*
- *In some instances, yes. Especially rural and remote ESO's who require computer equipment/travel costs etc to access veterans and provide a high level of advice.*

Claims Assessors, on the other hand, appear far from convinced that the BEST funds have had any appreciable impact on the quality of claims at the primary level. Their perceptions about ESO's with BEST funding were that they

Are submitting better quality claims	0
Are submitting partly improved quality claims	3
Are NOT submitting better quality claims	3
Don't know which claims come through funded ESO's	1

ESO representatives were invited in the ESO survey to make comments on the need for more feedback in relation to the quality of primary claims.

Of those who did respond to the question, 20 ESO respondents (25%) felt there was no need for more feedback from the Department on the quality of primary claims, some indicating that their State DVA office was excellent in providing feedback and rapport was good, others indicating that their results spoke for themselves. They described the high quality of their relationship with the Department in respect of feedback and said that they either had regular meetings with departmental staff, had a well-used telephone link inside the Department or were part of a well-planned and instituted feedback process.

Forty-six percent of respondents, however, made spirited pleas for DVA to give them more feedback on a wide variety of issues. This group made a variety of complaints about there being no feedback, others said that feedback was one-way (namely from them to the DVA) and one complained about having to use Freedom of Information legislation to get required information. Others, however, made a wide range of suggestions about how feedback and relationships between the ESO's and the Department could be improved.

**Table 18: Suggestions made by ESO representatives for increasing feedback and improving relations between ESO's and DVA**

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- *Individual ESO's or a group of ESO's should invite Review Officers and other compensation staff to their respective organisations and hold information workshops on all compensation matters. This will have a very successful outcome and develop a good working rapport with the DVA staff.*
  - *It would be an advantage to have say once each 6 months a meeting between Centre Management and DVA to discuss the mutual shortcomings.*
  - *Feedback is essential - but it appears to be one-way. As an ESO we do not see any improvement in claims being successful at the primary level regardless of how well the ESO improves.*
  - *There are too many inconsistencies between states (we lodge claims by mail if need be in all States)*
  - *Visits by senior staff for informal training would be appreciated. S31 officers have visited in this way and it was very beneficial.*
  - *The system in place at DVA is not working - s31 is not operating well - they will not intervene on about 80% of claims that really do not need to proceed to VRB. Few s31 requests are successful. This is ironic because the same argument and material used on a failed s31 succeeds at the subsequent VRB hearing.*
  - *An occasional article providing feedback on below par practice in state newsletters would be useful.*
  - *An adequate primary claim does/should not need extra information. It is difficult to appreciate why some claims are rejected. Personal contact by determining officers with advocate would be helpful, instead of "use FOI if you have to know why" etc.*
  - *Our biggest problem is lack of access to veteran's repatriation files. To examine files requires travel to the nearest VAN office. Could DVA & Centrelink arrange for files to*
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*be sent to FOI office to save us time?*

- *We do need more feedback from s31, VRB and AAT claims.*
  - *Explanations required for why some primary claims that meet SOPs get knocked back. However on appeal they are accepted.*
  - *There is no feedback to representatives in respect to ISS (war widows/ers)*
  - *More feedback on individual volunteers, so we can deal with training needs of pension officers.*
- 

BEST Managers' comments about feedback were:

- *Needs to be more structured - perhaps through our compensation Visits Program and our QA process. Regular feedback would be of great assistance.*
- *The extent of feedback varies depending on the location and accessibility of the particular ESO. It also tends to be unstructured insofar as for the most part it might be on a claim-by-claim basis, whilst with some ESO's there are regular info/discussion sessions initiated by the Claims (Dept) teams. It is a hard area to be too prescriptive in.*
- *Some feedback available when s31 Outreach Officer visits areas and also when Review Officer/s discuss cases with the practitioner but otherwise no feedback is available*
- *Feedback should be formalised and standardised. In NSW this feedback is informal and is addressed by claims assessors where required. Also addressed through TIP. NSW conducts visits to ESO's where this has been required or where a need may have been identified, to address the ESO's particular needs. We are keen to implement a system of examining the actual claim form submitted by ESO's (especially those funded by BEST) to provide feedback to ESO regarding issues which may improve the quality of claims.*

Claims Assessors, in our opinion, are the people in DVA in the best position to provide feedback to practitioners on the submission of primary claims. Hence we were particularly interested to obtain their comments on feedback. The question in their survey was worded as follows: **What kind of feedback does your office provide to ESO's and support centres about the quality needs of claims?** Answers were as follows:

- *Very little - should be encouraged;*
- *Informal, and on a case-by-case basis;*
- *Discussions with individual reps over specific cases. TIP courses;*
- *We cannot comment on feedback provided by the office. CA's do not have time to follow each case up with ESO's; Some ESO offices are usually closed and can leave message on an answer machine only;*
- *Assessors have regular visits to Veteran centres RSL's etc. On phone when discussing claim;*
- *Mainly via outreach programs or ad hoc on an individual basis with the reps;*
- *We do it when we run TIP update and claims workshops and rather than personalising it we run mock "claims from hell" ie had claims and get ESO's to identify the problems & how to fix them. These workshops do have some effect, but there are other factors affecting quality that are systemic and others that result from ESO personality and style.*

In response to a question about whether this feedback is having any effect on the quality of claims that they are receiving, the Claims Assessors replied:

<b>Yes</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Can't tell</b>	<b>4</b>

BEST Managers were then asked what they considered to be the key to the primary claims (process and content) being better?

- *Removing admin tasks from volunteers. Refresher training - keeping up-to-date. IT training to ensure proficiency. Meetings with claims assessors to ensure two-way feedback. Add to our QA process and ensure feedback to pension officers/advocates;*
- *Better training/informed ESO's who have access to appropriate levels of support (admin and technological);*
- *Proper completion of claim form with diagnoses and with proper contentions;*
- *Amongst ESO's - understanding of the determining system/SOPs/well completed claim and application forms and interaction between ESO's and the Dept especially claims assessors.*

Claims assessors were asked the same question, and their replies were:

- *Whether the conditions claimed are appropriate as well as legitimate ie don't claim tinnitus, tinea and malaria when the guy is dying of lung cancer;*
- *All of given reasons. Also signatures;*
- *ESO's should not attempt to diagnose a claim and encourage veterans to claim a condition that they do not have;*
- *Submit supporting documentation with the claim eg SQuest with the claim form means the doctor receives less forms; Dr's diagnoses with claimed condition are a MUST*
- *The provision of a diagnosis on the claim form by the LMO's;*
- *Expeditious assessment is also a matter of the availability of specialists (psychs mainly) - often a 3 month wait for an appointment, the veterans timeliness in responding to requests including medical appointments, a huge and complex number of matters in DVA (resources, expertise, systems).*

When asked about identified items which display the biggest need for improvement in the claims that they are processing, the Claims Assessors selected the following:

- *Consulting SOPs;*
- *No supporting medical/other documentation (including statutory declarations);*
- *Legitimacy of claims;*
- *Full and accurate completion ie fill in the diagnosis;*
- *Reference to SOPs to ensure there is some point to the claim;*
- *Legitimate vs ambit claims;*
- *Supporting documentation;*

- *Provision of diagnoses from a qualified practitioner for each condition; advice on claim form if veteran is away or in hospital etc or unable to attend appointments;*
- *The provision of a diagnosis on the claim form by the LMO's;*
- *POs are well intentioned but take on enormous case loads - more than 200 - & can't manage and don't delegate;*
- *Too many also even though recently trained, trained and trained, still get it wrong, provide wrong advice, over-promise and under-deliver. The biggest need could be the supporting documentation.*

We have formed the opinion that one of the primary contributors to the quality of primary claims is the quality of the relationship between ESO's and the Department. We are also aware that the quality of this relationship has been and is improving because of the BEST program. There is, however, still a long way to go before some aspects of the old adversarial relationship between the two entities is replaced by more collaborative and mutual veteran's services. Feedback from the Department on the quality of primary claims is one area where the Department can actively play a part in reducing the level of tension between ESO's and the DVA where this exists.

In addition to improving feedback, the Claims Assessors made some useful suggestions about how to target BEST funds in order to have a more effective impact on quality of claims. Their suggestions were:

- *By linking funding to identifiable improvement in these areas; formal monitoring of claim quality from funded organisations;*
- *Give us the ability to withhold funds from ESO's who repeatedly break a codified standard to which they must agree in order to get the funds in the first place;*
- *BEST coordinator should sample a certain percentage of claims assisted by ESO's;*
- *Introduce a direct reporting system between claims assessors and BEST coordinators Perhaps funding could be limited to those centres/ reps who are prepared to meet certain standards/requirements in the submission of claims;*
- *I honestly think we should stop trying to convince ourselves and the taxpayer that this program measurably improves claim quality. Just make it an infrastructure \$ program for POs and start from there.*

The conclusion that the evaluators have been forced to make in the light of this data and analysis and our discussions with various stakeholders, is that the role of BEST funding in improving the quality of primary claims, while an important issue, is currently confused and confusing. The word 'quality', while understood generally and happily accepted as a necessary part of BEST's development, is too broad. Steps need to be made, as earlier argued, to clarify the contributors to 'quality', and to set in place some systematic data collection so that the question can be answered unequivocally.

## ***Reduction in appeals***

As noted earlier, the second current objective of the BEST finding program is to *reduce the rate of appeals to the Veterans' Review Board (VRB)*. Evidence that this objective is being met could also be taken to be evidence also that the aim of the BEST program is being achieved.

As noted earlier, also, there is an apparent *prima facie* logical connection between this and the first objective (improving quality of primary claims). It seems reasonable to expect that an increase in the quality of primary claims would lead to an increase in the success rate, leading to more general satisfaction among claimants such that they would be less likely to make an appeal to the VRB.

Because the veteran or dependent has the right to make an appeal at any time, even when advised by a practitioner that the outcome is not likely to be positive, a 'successful' outcome at the primary level is no guarantee that an appeal will not follow. There were instances readily brought to our attention of veterans who have appealed under such circumstances and have had their appeal upheld. This is well known in the veteran community and acts as reinforcement to those veterans who want to handle things their own way and 'take their chances'.

In order to seek some further evidence from stakeholders, however, the ESO survey sought answers directly from ESO respondents about their perception of any reduction in the number of appeals as a result of BEST funding.

Of those who gave an answer to this question (95% of respondents), 22 respondents (27.5%) claimed that the BEST funding had made no contribution at all to a reduction in the number of appeals from those veterans or their dependants, who used the ESO to make a claim or proceed to appeal. These ESO respondents suggested that a range of other factors had contributed, if there had been a reduction, namely:

- Ability to conduct rural and remote visits to veterans was seen as a significant factor;
- The high quality of the TIP course is important;
- The high quality of expertise and training of the delegate handling the claim was a factor;
- Greater use of s31 reviews, talking to knowledgeable DVA officers, having their own internal quality control measures to avoid common mistakes and ensuring that claims meet the requirements of SOPs.

Other respondents either said that there had been no reduction in appeals for any reason, or claimed that the quality of VRB staff and DVA staff were the reason for no reduction (eg there was poor interpretation of the Act by DVA staff).

Respondents who felt that getting a BEST grant had contributed in some way to a reduction in the number of appeals (44 or 55%) gave the following reasons:

**Table 19: Reasons given by ESO representatives for reductions in the number of appeals**

REASON	Number	%
Access to Internet, TIP, CLIK and SOPs	9	20%
Standard of POs and Advocates	8	18%
Greater success at Primary Level Claims	8	18%
Resources to do more s31 Reviews	4	9%
Improved office environment	2	4.5%
Additional staff	2	4.5%
Other – Miscellaneous, no common themes	11	25%

Again, it may be noted that some of these explanations, indeed the most commonly provided one, are only partly BEST-related, and some only indirectly.

A subsidiary question in the ESO survey invited unsuccessful BEST applicants to indicate whether, had they received a grant, they would have been able to reduce the rate of appeals to the VRB by their client veterans and their dependents. This is a hypothetical question and one on which we cannot place too much store, but it is interesting to note the responses.

- *Unsuccessful applications for BEST just increases the stress on the veterans and does not reduce the rate of appeals.*
- *Even when we finally got a grant we still ended up at the VRB and DVA assessors will still ensure that VRB appeals continue.*
- *Our grant was for small change in administration or office equipment and could not make such a major difference to appeal processes. It just made the process of office administration easier.*
- *We have concentrated on s31 Review processes with success.*
- *We think the quality of the service is what brings results, especially in getting the first claim right, not grant money.*
- *We just need more comprehensive knowledge and this will enable us to reduce the rate of appeals, not a BEST grant necessarily.*

BEST managers were also invited to comment on whether there had been a reduction in appeals for BEST-funded ESO's. Two said 'yes' and two said 'can't tell'.

They were also invited to indicate what they consider to be the key to a reduction in the number of (a) Section 31 appeals, (b) VRB appeals; and (c) AAT appeals.

Among their perceptions of what is key to a reduction in appeals are the following comments:

(a) s31 appeals

- *Knowledge of SOPs/Training/Relationship with s31 appeal staff - however if a veteran insists on appealing even when advised that the outcome will not be favourable, the appeal must go ahead;*
- *Appeal rates in WA are lowest of all State offices, and we believe this is due to a combination of factors: the training of ESO representatives through the TIP processes; the better knowledge and understanding the ESO groups have of the processes; their (ESO) access to research materials etc (CLIK, SOPs etc); and their interactions with staff in the processing areas of the State Office to discuss claims, queries etc.;*
- *High quality of reasons for decision provided by Claims Assessors reduces this level as veteran/ESO provided with understanding of how decision arrived at. Claimant should provide all available evidence at time of lodgement of claim.*

(b) VRB appeals

For VRB appeals, the BEST managers gave the same comments as for s31 appeals.

(c) AAT appeals

The only additional comments for AAT over other types of appeals were:

- *The problem with AAT is that the Department concedes many cases - so it is sometimes considered worthwhile to appeal;*
- *Cannot comment.*

Taking all these responses together, there appears to be fairly widespread agreement that BEST funding as it is currently applied makes (and can make) little direct impact on the reduction of appeals.

### **Electronic Lodgement**

As noted earlier, the fostering of electronic lodgement of claims is also a stated objective of the program. For this reason alone, it can be considered to also be a possible source of evidence that the program is fulfilling its aim.

Whatever is, or was, meant by the phrase 'electronic lodgement', the facility does not currently exist other than through general E-mail (and we don't know whether this is done or done with the 'blessing' of Departmental staff). We nevertheless sought the views of ESO representatives, and State BEST Managers on electronic lodgement. The first of the following tables presents results of questions addressed to ESO's and support centres.

**Table 20: Level of interest shown by ESO respondents in electronic lodgement of claims**

<b>Options</b>	<b>Number</b>
Very interested and eager	39 (49%)
Quite interested and eager	16 (20%)
Only moderately interested and eager	14 (18%)
Not at all interested or eager	5 (6%)
Opposed to the idea	2 (3%)
No response	4 (5%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>

*Prima facie* this result would suggest strong support for moving to e-lodgement as soon as the technical problems have been solved. However, a subsidiary question in the ESO survey asked respondents how electronic lodgement would benefit them. The results, as shown in the following table are informative.

**Table 21: Views of ESO respondents about the value of electronic lodgement of claims**

<b>Comments</b>	<b>Number</b>
No comments made	10 (12.5%)
Speedier lodgement and savings in time	25 (31%)
Less paper work, filing space and photocopying	12 (15%)
Greater efficiency	11 (14%)
Have reservations about electronic lodgement* (see below)	11 (14%)
Little or no impact/advantage	4 (5%)
Have no knowledge or understanding of electronic lodgement	1 (1%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>73.075</i>

\* Reservations expressed included:

- Rural and remote areas not having access to the Internet;
- Speed of transmission does not necessarily result in a speedier outcome;
- The elderly's mistrust of IT, the increase in time taken to complete the form, and the manner in which the data would be processed on receipt at DVA;
- If the program is a checklist program it will not proceed until each question is asked and is instantaneous;
- Electronic submissions would probably not hasten the claims assessment process, but would probably benefit DVA record keeping more than our office;
- Worried about privacy and security of the net;
- We in the country would prefer manual lodgements;
- Electronic lodgement necessitating one task at a time will not allow flexibility - and has the potential to be chaotic if there is a loss of power or telephone connection during transmission;
- Trained paid staff will be required to operate these new systems;
- Use of computer would lead to the loss of face-to-face contact;

The client could be disadvantaged as the ESO may be taken out of the loop unintentionally. There needs to be some ESO/Client security maintained.

BEST Managers were also asked how they thought electronic lodgement would benefit (a) veterans and their dependents, and (b) ESO's and support centres. Their comments were as follows:

**(a) re veterans and their dependents,**

- *Instant lodgement when information eg diagnosis, is available;*
- *Younger veterans are more likely to utilise electronic lodgement facilities should they be available, than older veterans;*
- *Speed up decision-making;*
- *Immediate lodgement of claim/application following completion.*

**(b) re ESO's and support centres?**

- *A mixed bag. Some pension officers are not really computer literate and problems arise when during an interview with a veteran/widow due to the attention required to the computer. It can impact adversely on the interview because of constant interruptions. If it is done later, there is double handling.*
- *ESO representatives who have Internet access are reasonably likely to lodge claims electronically. Although, as most claims also include many and various attachments/supporting material, it is still too early to know the impact on the claims process*
- *Greater networking with DVA*
- *Immediate lodgement of claim/application following completion. Less paperwork and filing*

It became clear to the evaluators when considering the information from various sources, that there is a degree of confusion about what is meant by 'electronic lodgement'. It could range in people's thinking from something as simple as attaching free formatted documents to an E-mail and sending them to the Department; through filling out a screen form, to a semi-intelligent screen driven 'diagnostic' program that questioned the applicant, with or without pension officer assistance, and conceivably came to a decision as a result of that question trail plus information retrieved by the program from other DVA internal sources and databases. The reservations raised by respondents may or may not be relevant depending on what sort of system is introduced.

There is also an equity issue involved here, in that while the more computer-literate pension officers may welcome electronic lodgement and feel fully at home with it, the less at-home-with-computers pension officers may feel that they are being disadvantaged.

It seems important to us, that what is meant by electronic lodgement be clarified and disseminated so that stakeholders will have a better idea and be able to form a more informed opinion about its relevance and usefulness. No doubt the pilot testing of the envisaged facility will assist.

### **Welfare service promotion**

Given that the third aim of the BEST program is to promote the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants, survey questions were addressed to ESO respondents and to BEST managers about welfare service consequences of BEST funding. In this, we were following the same logic that if this is an acceptable objective of the Program, related to its aim, then evidence that it is being fulfilled, would *ipso facto* be evidence that the aim of BEST is being fulfilled.

ESO's and support centres were asked whether they had been able to conduct any welfare work as a result of receiving a BEST grant. Their responses were as follows:

Twenty-nine (36.25%) ESO respondents said they have not conducted any welfare work as a result of BEST funding. This was not taken to mean that no welfare work has been conducted by these 29 organisations, but that in these cases, the funding for this work comes from other sources.

Forty-two (52.5%) of the ESO respondents said that they did conduct some welfare work as a result of receiving a BEST grant and the welfare work done is summarised in the following table. As some of the organisations did a variety of different kinds of welfare work, the kinds of work done have been placed in rank order of frequency mentioned.

**Table 22: Types of welfare work conducted under BEST funding**

<b>Type of welfare work</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Access to computer programs/Websites/e-mail on welfare	9
Hospital Visits	8
Home Visits/Outreach services	7
Unspecified	6
PT admin support frees up POs for welfare	3
Health Seminars/Information Days	3
Downloading fact sheets from DVA	3
Liaison/Referral with/to other agencies	2
Establish & maintain data base on veterans/war widows	2
Like to do more welfare work	2
Miscellaneous: Formed a Diggers Day Club; Quicker access to VAN; Compiling data base of local/district welfare agencies; Transport to medical /other appointments; Assistance to obtain home care; Funeral arrangements; Computer and Office equipment; Accurate advice; Raising awareness of entitlements.	All 1

These results have revealed some interesting information about BEST and welfare services and activities. Discussions with DVA staff and ESO's indicate that this objective is significantly downplayed when it comes to eligibility for BEST grants, even though it is a stated objective of the program.

The reason for this may be quite obvious in the sense that if welfare activity in the ESO's were to be given prominence, then there would be many claims made for the grants to provide for part time or full time welfare officers/case aides and social workers. The current budget is not able to fund all of the funding applications as it is. Welfare applications, no doubt, would blow the current budget out and possibly hinder the fulfilment of the objectives relating to pension and disability claims at the primary level.

The subtle message about not highlighting the use of BEST for welfare services has got through, according to the responses to this question. More than one third of ESO respondents appeared to go to great pains to declare that they have not used BEST grants for welfare work. One ESO even answered the question with a large NO in capital letters. Others went on to explain that any welfare work they did was funded from other sources of income.

More than 50% of the respondents, however, were prepared to admit that they used the BEST grant, if it was for paid staff, to free pension officers so they could do some welfare work, or in the case of computer and peripheral office equipment, they had used the Internet to gain access to welfare information and welfare services.

It has been pointed out to us that there are in fact no restrictions on the use of computers or computer equipment as provided under the BEST program. This may be technically true, though the requirement that funded organisation provide the department in their quarterly reports with a record of how the computer has been used sends a message that computers should be only used for 'proper activities'.

In our opinion, the use of computers for a variety of pension and welfare-related activities fits within the ambit of the stated aim of the BEST program which is to *provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work*. If an ESO has a machine in its office that is capable of accessing welfare information or creating databases that will contribute to the on-going welfare and well being of their clientele, why should it not be used in this way, especially if its use is not preventing or blocking the processing of primary claims?

The question about welfare activities, when addressed to BEST Managers, took a slightly different approach, and asked:

Given that the range of welfare work that is undertaken by ESO's and support centres is almost unlimited, are there, in your experience, particular aspects of welfare work that might be supported in relation to the aims of the BEST program? If so, what are they?

Their responses to this question were as follows:

- *Not really sure how to answer this. Assistance with effective computer facilities and related admin support is probably more likely to ensure that the ESO's have better capacity to access a variety of information which will assist them with their welfare related services;*
- *Currently in assessing claims/applications for BEST, no points are given on the matrix for welfare services provided by an ESO;*
- *Welfare assistance would be provided as part and parcel of pension assistance in many cases. Instances such as pension officers accompanying veterans to medical appointments (for claims) is one example, also follow-up advice concerning community facilities where medical conditions requires eg transport assistance for immobile veterans' counselling services, meals on wheels etc.*

It is apparent to us that there is a degree of ambiguity in the minds of many stakeholders about funding being available under BEST for welfare activities. It is also true that 'welfare' can be and is variously interpreted. There was an original intention that welfare activities be funded, but given the shortage of funds this has tended to be relegated in the determination of priorities.

We believe that any ambiguity about BEST being used for welfare purposes needs to be clarified by saying what the BEST grants can and cannot be used for in this regard. There would be strong resistance to the welfare objective for BEST being taken out, even though it tends not to be funded at present. If welfare applications are to be eligible, then the Department needs to make it quite clear that they are, and also make it clear how BEST may and may not be used for welfare purposes. A consequence will be that if a welfare application is to be funded, some other application may have to be declined.

We recommend that the instructions to successful BEST grant applicants include that, provided there is no impediment to the primary claims process, the computer and office peripheral machines may be used to assist veterans with their welfare needs through downloading information about welfare services or making referrals of veterans to needed welfare agencies.

Welfare activity and ex-service organisational activity are probably synonymous. Some of this 'welfare' work is quite trivial albeit very important to recipients who are in varying degrees of dependency. On the other hand, there are categories of welfare work that are very demanding and should only be conducted by skilled welfare officers.

This latter point raises a serious question about the quality of welfare services provided by the ESO's' welfare officers. In other client groups, such as youth, women and children, welfare officers have to have appropriate qualifications and training to be able to offer welfare services. In some areas they even need to be unionised. Although the quality of the welfare work done by unpaid volunteer veterans and

other voluntary staff was not a part of our brief as consultants evaluating the BEST program, it perhaps needs to be said that the Department needs to be cautious about blanket funding for 'welfare activities'. This only goes to reinforce our contention that 'welfare services', like quality of primary claims, needs to be properly defined.

If, having defined it, the Department can agree to fund specific services, so-defined under the limited amount of BEST funding, then it would be in order for the Department to require that those delivering the service were appropriately trained or qualified, just as it is an expectation now, that funded organisations are using TIP-trained practitioners.

We understand that there are newly developed welfare components in TIP training, and this may be taken as evidence of the endorsement that the Department gives to welfare activities.

If more than TIP training were to be required, then it might be possible that some BEST funding could be used to enable appropriate ESO personnel to undertake recognised and accredited training to ensure a high standard in this aspect of work with veterans.

## **Interim Conclusions**

Earlier, it was argued that the most critical question in evaluating the program was *whether the program was achieving its aim*. We declared our intention to approach that question from two directions:

1. Is there evidence that the stated aim (plus objectives and outcome) is being achieved?
2. Is there other evidence that may not be directly related to the objectives as stated but can nevertheless be taken to show that the performance of the program is satisfactory?

To this point in the report we have endeavoured to present data and argument that is pertinent to the first approach. Before turning to the second approach, we draw the following interim conclusions:

- (i) The stated aim, objectives and outcomes for the program, are not an adequately clear and coherent set of key statements and should be improved;
- (ii) The evidence from ESO respondents, BEST Managers and Claims Assessors does not strongly support the view that any of the stated objectives are being fulfilled to a high enough level. This is not necessarily a failing of the program itself, but is seen by the evaluators to be equally a shortcoming in the statement of objectives;

- (iii) All four of the stated objectives contain desirable consequences for the Department, the ESO community and veterans and their dependents. But it can be argued that those particular objectives are not, in their present form or under current circumstances, amenable to measurement or achievement under BEST funding.

We need, then, to turn to the second approach and enquire *is there other evidence that may not be directly related to the objectives as stated but can nevertheless be taken to show that the performance of the program is satisfactory?*

We sought evidence that representation (a key function of BEST funding of ESO's and support centres) makes a difference.

### ***Differences between represented success rates and non-represented success rates***

The following section presents very important results for the evaluation of the program. It arose out of the attempt to find a statistical measure for 'successful outcome' in relation to primary claims. As noted earlier, a successful outcome (interpreted as a payment outcome) is of central interest to veterans themselves. (An unsuccessful outcome might also be considered the proper result in cases where it is clear that a claim is frivolous.)

If it could be shown that where claims are made with the support, advice and assistance of pensions officers (particularly those in a BEST-funded ESO or support centre) are more likely to be successful than where there is no such support, then this could be taken at least as indirect evidence that the BEST program is effective.

After some discussion with Departmental personnel about what statistics could be retrieved from DVA databases, it was decided to attempt to extract data pertaining to outcomes from claims made at the primary level.

The data extracted showed the following outcomes:

1. No. of claims having received auto payment;
2. No. of claims having received manual payment;
3. No. of claims that were 'merged';
4. No. of claims that had received no payment;
5. Claims that were not finalised;
6. Claims that had been withdrawn/

These data were also broken down according to the substance of the claim, ie

- AFI;
- Death;
- Disability;
- DP Assessment;
- S31 Assessment;
- S31 Death;

- S31 Disability;
- S31 Disability Assessment.

We used this data to compare the proportion of claims that were ‘successful’ (= received payment made either manually or automatically) and had been made with the assistance of a practitioner (represented), with the proportion of claims that were ‘successful’ but had been made without the assistance of a practitioner (non-represented). It might, of course, be argued by some that payment does not necessarily equate with ‘success’. For example, where a veteran has applied for and believes that the level of payment should be at a higher level than is the outcome, he/she may well feel that the outcome has been less than successful.

We examined aggregate data broken down by State (ie did not analyse by substance of claim). The data are as follows:

**Table 23: Proportions of all claims that received payment (= ‘were successful’) in the period from 1 Feb 2002\*, by State**

Claims	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	National
Non-represented	929 (37%)	885 (29%)	754 (33%)	308 (29%)	304 (29%)	118 (36%)	3298 (32%)
Represented	1584 (63%)	2119 (71%)	1556 (67%)	759 (71%)	751 (71%)	206 (64%)	6975 (68%)
Total Successful	2513	3004	2310	1067	1055	324	10273
All claims made	5220	6127	4392	2000	2073	750	20562

\* Data of this kind were not available prior to 1 Feb 2002

Percentages shown in this table are for non-represented or represented claims as a proportion of the total number of successful claims in each State.

These data were subjected to a test for statistical significance (where the proportions of non-represented to represented claims in each State were taken as the basis for expected frequencies), and were found to be extremely significant (chi square = 567.131, sig. < .0001, d.f. 5).

Although there is, to the naked eye, a difference factor between States, there is a more obvious and consistent difference to be seen between represented and non-represented claims. We therefore draw from this a very confident conclusion, that successful outcomes are significantly more likely for claims made with the assistance of practitioners.

It seems likely, also, that there could be significant differences between States, with New South Wales and Queensland showing more of a difference than the other States (ie represented claims could be more likely to have a successful outcome in NSW and QLD than non-represented claims).

This data became available in the last weeks of this evaluation and we have not been able to undertake finer analyses of it. However, this result in itself has major implications for the evaluation and the future of the BEST program.

This result cannot be taken to mean necessarily that BEST funding is responsible. We have not distinguished, and are not able to distinguish, in the data above between representatives that are BEST funded and those that are not. However, it at least establishes that assisted claims are more likely to have a favourable outcome for veterans. It follows that resources and support put into assisting ESO practitioners can only improve the likelihood that outcomes will be better for veterans and their dependents. The result also carries a strong message to veterans, that their chances of succeeding with a claim are higher if they seek the help of an ESO practitioner.

Further investigations of this kind could be useful for raising the standard of claims submission. For instance, even with data as it is currently collected, it would be possible, we believe to plot representatives against outcomes. This would show which representatives have a higher 'success' rate. This process could be refined further by having a code entered into the computer system by Claims Assessors, to indicate the reason for non-success. Such information would be indicative of areas where practitioners could improve their service and which areas of claim submission should not be attributed to practitioners.

To monitor volunteer practitioners like this might seem hard on them, but it needs to be seen in the light of the ultimate goal of assisting veterans and widows/widowers. If practitioners, albeit volunteers, are contributing to an unsuccessful outcome for veterans, or indeed causing the process to be in some way inefficient, that shortcoming needs to be addressed, by feedback, by training, by support, or if absolutely necessary, more stringent measures. It is clearly in the veterans' interest, and the Department's, that practitioners provide accurate, timely, and professional assistance to their clients.

### ***Practitioner capability and standards***

The evaluators have noted that in the process of preparing and submitting primary claims with assistance from practitioners, the element of personal skill is the critical factor. This is in common with all manner of services delivered by human advisors, advocates and agents, in whatever field.

There appears to be evidence, though not gathered specifically by the evaluators, that the very best claims are coming consistently from highly skilled, experienced and very identifiable practitioners. It seems highly likely also that poorer claims could be traced consistently to one of two possibilities:

1. The veteran (or dependent) making the claim is ill-informed, has not obtained or assembled sufficient supporting evidence in a way that is appropriate, or is making a claim that does not or cannot meet the requirements for a successful claim, and that veteran (or dependent) is making the claim unassisted;
2. A practitioner, from whom a veteran (or dependent) is seeking assistance in making a claim, is him/herself, wittingly or unwittingly providing inaccurate or incomplete (unprofessional) advice and assistance to the claimant.

The Department and ESO's acknowledge that there is an increasing need for practitioners to be trained in the legislation, accompanying processes and regulations (in the face of growing complexity), and to keep up-to-date with emerging information, and rulings. Stakeholders also clearly acknowledge and respect the TIP training program for the contribution it makes to helping practitioners acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform a professional job in assisting veterans.

Yet despite this, there would appear to be significant variability in the quality of work performed by practitioners. This is not intended to be harshly critical of those who give their time and energy freely to the work of pensions advice and assistance, or advocacy, or welfare work to the veteran community. It is to simply acknowledge a reality in the system. Indeed, the evaluators would hasten to add their commendation to the army of volunteers that sustain this sector and have helped many veterans and their dependents to avail themselves of their entitlements. However, as has been the case with other fields of expertise in the human service sector, change may be inevitable if those who rely on advice and assistance are to receive the quality of assistance that is their entitlement.

The variability in quality between practitioners, can be attributed to a number of factors, such as:

- Lack of education and training;
- Lack of knowledge;
- Illness, disability, incapacity and aging;
- Insufficient volume of work (since skills are often sharpened through repeated activity, and the case load of many practitioners is extremely light);
- An excessive work load (some practitioners are reported to carry extremely large numbers of clients);
- The 'volunteer factor' itself (since in many cases the lack of qualified personnel leads less able but very willing people to step in to fulfil an obvious need);
- Lack of adequate supports.

The BEST program, along with various other provisions from the Department, is seeking to address, or compensate for, these natural human foibles.

Our observation is that more might be done through both TIP and BEST to ensure that practitioner service is of the highest quality. We cannot readily document it, but we recollect that we have been told of ESO practitioners working under BEST funded organisational umbrellas, that have not undergone TIP training.

We are inclined to recommend for instance that a higher standard of practitioner delivery be set as an objective for the program, to take place over a set, finite period.

A comparative statistic is the proportion of 'unsuccessful' (equals for this purpose the 'no payment') claims which were processed in each State and overall. This statistic for each State is presented in the Table following. Also presented in the table are the

overall numbers of represented and non-represented claims, gathered for the same period.

**Table 24: Claims processed since 1 February 2002 that were unsuccessful broken down by representation. Total unsuccessful and successful claims for information**

Claims	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	National
Non-represented and unsuccessful	524 (18%)	406 (21%)	358 (17%)	120 (10%)	172 (26%)	71 (23%)	1651 (19%)
Represented and unsuccessful	613 (26%)	883 (21%)	537 (23%)	180 (9%)	302 (21%)	98 (22%)	2613 (22%)
Total non-represented	2874	1952	2060	742	664	303	8595
Total represented	2346	4175	2332	1258	1409	447	11967
Total unsuccessful	1137	1289	895	300	474	169	4264
Total Successful	2513	3004	2310	1067	1055	324	10273
All claims made	5220	6127	4392	2000	2073	750	20562

**Note: Percentages have been calculated to show what proportion of non-represented claims were unsuccessful (=got no payment) and the proportion of represented claims that were unsuccessful (eg for NSW, 524/2874)**

Like the treatment given to the data in Table 23, these data were subjected to a test for statistical significance (with again the proportions of non-represented to represented claims in each State taken as the basis for expected frequencies), and were also found to be very significant (chi square = 59.39, sig. < .001, d.f. 5), though the effect is not as great. That is, whether a claim is represented or not, has less effect on whether a claim is likely to result in non-payment.

With the exceptions of NSW and QLD, the proportion of 'unsuccessful' claims were about equal for unrepresented and represented claims. In these two States, however, represented claims had a somewhat larger proportion of unsuccessful claims, and since the overall difference is statistically significant, it raises the question as to why these two States have a different outcome. The evaluators speculate that were these two States showing an outcome more like the other States, there may not have been a statistically significant result to this particular analysis.

Why then, might these two States be showing a higher percentage of unsuccessful claims that are represented? There would appear *prima facie* to be two places to look for an explanation:

- In the 'style' of claims made by practitioners in NSW and QLD - eg. do they support more ambit claims than practitioners in other States?
- In the 'approach' of the claims assessors in NSW and QLD - e.g. are they 'harder' on represented claims than in other States?

An answer to this question was outside the brief of the evaluators, but bears investigation.

What is perhaps more interesting, is the fact that factors that apparently lead to a claim being successful are independent of those factors that appear to result in a claim being unsuccessful. Again, we did not have the resources to investigate the possible explanation for this. What it appears to indicate, is that when a claim is assessed as not containing a sufficient and 'reasonable' hypothesis to support the claim, that factor is less likely to be affected or influenced by a practitioner. On the other hand a supporting argument can be significantly affected by the advice and work of a knowledgeable and skilful practitioner.

The following table pulls together three sets of information for comparison:

- The proportions of unsuccessful claims;
- The proportions of successful claims; and
- The proportions of represented to non-represented claims.

This table shows that in all States except New South Wales, there were more represented claims than non-represented claims. In Victoria and South Australia, the ratio of represented to non-represented claims is more than 2 to 1.

Some doubt was expressed by members of the steering committee about the data in this table. Two possible reasons can be given that could suggest that the data do not represent the situation accurately, though in the evaluators' opinion neither is very convincing. The first is that the data do not represent a full year, and cover only the period from 1 February 2002. But there is no obvious reason why that should affect the data unless by some quirk there are seasonal variations in some States but not in others. The second is that the means by which the data are collected, collated and extracted from the system has meant that there is some artificial factor at work. This too is unconvincing. Although we have been warned that the data may not be as up-to-date as is ideal, and that there may be some inaccuracies since the system data depends ultimately on human input, we consider it unlikely that there would be those factors at work to this degree in some States but not others.

It would seem on the other hand, to be quite plausible that progress towards wider coverage of veterans making claims with the assistance of practitioners could be more advanced in some States than others. Nevertheless, both the possibility that the data could be inaccurate, and the possibility that there could be State differences should be kept in mind. If this particular difference between NSW and QLD are rejected, then all of the data analysed in these tables and gather from the same source, would need to be rejected.

**Table 25: Percentage of claims that are unsuccessful and percentage of claims that are represented**

<b>Claims</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>VIC</b>	<b>QLD</b>	<b>WA</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>TAS</b>	<b>National</b>
Unsuccessful, non-represented	524 (10%)	406 (7%)	358 (8%)	120 (6%)	172 (8%)	71 (9%)	1651 (8%)
Unsuccessful, represented	613 (12%)	883 (14%)	537 (12%)	180 (9%)	302 (15%)	98 (13%)	2613 (13%)
Successful, non-represented	929 (37%)	885 (29%)	754 (33%)	308 (29%)	304 (29%)	118 (36%)	3298 (32%)
Successful, represented	1584 (63%)	2119 (71%)	1556 (67%)	759 (71%)	751 (71%)	206 (64%)	6975 (68%)
All non-represented	2874 (55%)	1952 (32%)	2060 (47%)	742 (37%)	664 (32%)	303 (40%)	8595 (42%)
All represented	2346 (45%)	4175 (68%)	2332 (53%)	1258 (63%)	1409 (68%)	447 (60%)	11967 (58%)
All claims made	5220	6127	4392	2000	2073	750	20562

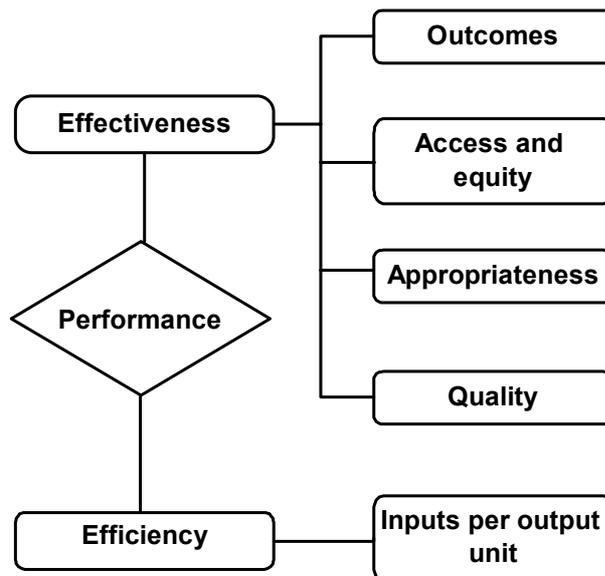
Given the earlier analysis (Table 23) that showed more successful outcomes when represented, it would seem logical to attempt through strategic support to raise the level and quality of represented cases.

Were data to be collected systematically about the reasons why a claim is either not successful, or does not measure up to some other agreed standard of quality, then it would be possible to present useful analyses on these other dimensions. This would then inform strategies to improve both the quality and outcomes of claims.

## **Efficiency and effectiveness**

A particular requirement for the evaluation was that the effectiveness and efficiency of the program be assessed.

'Efficiency' and 'effectiveness' are given definitions by the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision which fit its performance framework. The framework is reproduced in the following figure.



**Figure 2: A general framework for performance review (SCRCSSP, 2000)**

Bearing this model in mind, we have attempted to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the BEST funding program. We present our conclusions under headings suggested by the SCRCSSP framework.

### **Outcomes**

The expected outcomes for the program are clearly stated in the Program Guidelines and are repeated again here.

*This program will produce the following outcomes:*

- *Veterans and their dependants will benefit by having better informed ESO practitioners who can ensure claims lodged with the Department are of a high standard;*
- *The claims submitted will contain all the information required to make timely and quality decisions;*
- *ESO's will assist the Department in improving its claims proficiency; and*
- *ESO's will be assisted in developing the appropriate infrastructure needed to better service veterans and widows/widowers seeking claims assistance.*

There can be little doubt that some ESO practitioners are increasingly better informed. Just how many fall into this category is impossible to assess without an extensive survey of practitioners. There appeared to be some evidence that some practitioners are neither well informed nor becoming better informed.

Claims Assessor comments presented earlier, suggested that in this respect, the quality of claims is not improving. We are not in the position to assess the accuracy or

fairness of their judgements, and indeed it would require a different sort of study to reach properly informed opinions about the quality of claims submitted at the primary level (particularly by practitioners).

It is hard to escape the conclusion, however, that there would have to be an improvement in both the amount and kind of information being presented in claims as a result of improved access by practitioners to information on the Internet. At least some of this improved access would have to be attributable to the computer equipment, training and Internet access provided under the BEST program.

The extent to which *ESO's are assisting the Department in improving its claims proficiency* is again a rather difficult outcome to assess. This would have to be, in the current situation, a mainly subjective judgment. There is some, perhaps relevant, data available in the comparison of claims that are represented and those that are not. The problem with this data, is that it appears not to be consistently supplied and therefore may not be as accurate as we would like. At the same time it could be argued logically that as practitioners improve, so their better performance would have a positive impact on the claims proficiency of the Department.

There is, on a positive note, some definite indication that some ESO's and support centres have very cordial relations with Claims Assessors and that this constructive relationship means that both practitioners and DVA staff are giving and receiving useful feedback. There can be little doubt in our opinion, that where a *bona fide* ESO is functioning effectively in the area of pensions assistance, the quality of claims (and appeals) is high, and the Department's proficiency in processing claims is high. As much as possible, therefore, ought to be done to improve relations between ESO's and the Department.

On the final expected outcome, that *ESO's will be assisted in developing the appropriate infrastructure needed to better service veterans and widows/widowers seeking claims assistance* we would again find it easy to conclude that infrastructure improvements have been evident in the course of this evaluation, particularly in some of the innovative and joint activities that have been and are being developed by ex service organisations. These improvements are not solely due to BEST funding, but it cannot be disputed that BEST funds have assisted. Nor are we able to say categorically that infrastructure changes or development will necessarily lead to better outcomes. But we are of the opinion that infrastructure support is needed and that some overall strategic funding and support on infrastructure across Australia and within States, is necessary to capitalise on the benefits that are flowing from BEST funding to date.

### **Access and Equity**

It seemed to us as evaluators that there are several access and equity issues involved in this program. They are:

1. Equitable access for all veterans to assistance for which they are eligible under the legislation;
2. Access and equity for veterans dependents as well as for veterans;
3. Access and equity for veterans or their dependents who are living in rural or remote settings;
4. Access and equity for all Ex Service Organisations

Not all of these issues were canvassed in the survey. Some came to our attention as we conducted focus groups and talked with various stakeholders.

### *Access for all veterans and dependents*

It is a well-accepted fact that there is an unknown number of veterans in the Australian community for whom legislated assistance is probably available. While there appears to be a steady stream of people in this category coming and making claims, others may not know of, or may not want to seek, their entitlements. Both ESO respondents and BEST Managers were asked about this matter.

Eighty-nine percent of ESO respondents said that Veterans are finding out about their entitlements and are seeking help with claims. An earlier evaluation of TIP and CAGS (PALM, 1998) showed that there was a steady increase in the numbers of veterans and dependents seeking pensions and benefits. Comments offered by the respondents were a mixture of reasons why this is happening, a few suggestions to expedite this process and some problems being generated by this.

**Table 26: Comments made by ESO respondents about veterans who are finding out about their entitlements and how**

- 
- *Word of mouth by veterans*
  - *BEST has allowed us to visit veterans and military establishments and advise.*
  - *Veterans are more aware of their entitlements nowadays and see the ESO's as their friend and want all the help the ESO's have to offer*
  - *The credibility of the ESO and more understanding from the veteran. Of particular importance is the realisation that DVA is not the enemy.*
  - *DVA has been successful advertising/informing veterans of services and entitlements.*
  - *Formation of VIS centres, VCSS made the Veterans Home CS*
  - *Veterans prefer to deal with personnel that have an intimate appreciation of their background.*
  - *Veterans and their dependants are becoming less intimidated when filling out forms when the practitioner is with them.*
  - *The mentality of 'us' and 'them' is slowly disappearing.*
  - *The changes in legislation and the RMA Statement of Principle influenced widows to try again through their ESO.*
  - *Educational programs for ESO members and their veteran mates.*
  - *Seeing more and more war widows because of the success of the TIP program.*
-

- 
- *Community radio.*
  - *More veterans who are legatees are applying – used to be mainly widows.*
  - *Improved openness between DVA and veteran community in recent years has gone a long way to dispel the polarised “us v them” mentality from WWII to early 1990s.*
  - *In the cases where widow claims were refused prior to RMA SOP July 1994 many requests are being handled for re-application - many of which have been successful.*
  - *Competent POs, expertise and comfortable and friendly surroundings.*
  - *Veterans would rather visit Veterans Centre than DVA or RSL's, as many feel embarrassed.*
- 

Through the initiatives of the DVA in publicising the entitlements of veterans, the word of mouth process amongst veterans and the atmosphere provided for veterans by a wide range of ESO's and Veterans Centres, more and more members of the veteran community have been able to come to a centre or are being visited in their homes to not only learn about their entitlements, but to overcome their fears of making a claim and the embarrassment that previously accompanied the process. This is all to the credit of the Government, the Department and the ESO's who have devised a range of methods and approaches to ease the passage of claims to entitlements from the veterans to the support services of the Government of Australia.

However, there are still some problem areas and there are still some resource problems, which if the Government and the Department have the will to solve can be solved relatively easily.

The view expressed by some of the ESO's through this survey is that the Department needs to maintain its strategy of a broad community education campaign about veteran's entitlements and to counter any misinformation that may be affecting recognition of entitlements, and a small amount of money may be required to purchase space in local publications to enable the ESO's to do a little local promotion of their services with their current and potential constituents.

**Table 27: Problems identified by ESO respondents in relation to veterans who are only now seeking entitlements**

- 
- Far too many 2nd and 3rd hand claims – Information given at some ESO's is inadequate
  - Still many isolated and country areas in which veterans live in SA and NT where it is difficult to provide information on entitlements etc.
  - Dissemination of information to war widows via pensioner's organisations has been of questionable accuracy.
  - Numbers of new claims are always climbing putting pressure on resources.
  - Still a lot of bad information out there
  - Most veterans who submit claims on the Department's advice only, find their claims
-

- 
- rejected. It is also ironic that in rejecting a claim the Dept advises the vet to seek ESO assistance.
- We do more claims including medical evidence etc and still have to fight DVA all the way.
  - If the demand continues to increase, without additional funding, we may have to limit our services only to our members.
  - Talking to veterans of all ages and times of conflict/qualifying service, it is apparent not many know of the relevant service centres, pension officers or the detailed training they do.
  - Many smaller branches in remote and rural areas have no trained welfare and pension officers.
  - Because systems are changing all the time, refresher courses should be increased for older officers or computers installed
- 

BEST Managers were asked about what was being done to reach veterans who may still be unaware of their entitlements. To this question the managers replied:

- *The Regional Centres advertise their services and it is passed on by word of mouth. DVA does not use the media in any structured sense to advise veterans of its services.*
- *This is a very difficult problem. Community activists in WA continually seek contact with other organisations to ensure DVA benefits and services are promoted to the community generally to encourage unknown veterans to come forward.*
- *DVA does many media releases. I did a project many years ago where I recommended use of posters 'are you eligible?' in doctors' surgeries, pharmacies etc. Otherwise some promotion needs also to be done by the ESO's - recruiting members and promoting services.*
- *By funding for travel, as noted previously. Many ESO's are making more visits to rural areas and greater number of home visits.*

### ***Access and equity for veterans' dependents as well as for veterans;***

A second access and equity issue that the evaluators sensed was a possible problem has to do with a possible differentiation between veterans themselves, and their dependents. This was not investigated in the surveys or indeed directly in any of the focus groups. But there did appear to be some comments made to the effect that the dependents of veterans were not as entitled to benefits as the veterans themselves. This may have been simply an expression of opinion by some individuals, or it may even be more deeply rooted than a casual comment. It may, for example, be indicative of an organisational philosophy towards organisations such as Legacy whose main focus is on the needs of veterans' dependents. At the same time, it is quite evident that in many parts of Australia, there is strong cooperation between organisations including Legacy. Indeed it was convincingly explained to us, that there is a great deal to be gained in terms of effectiveness and efficiency in cooperation between veterans organisations and organisations dealing more specifically with dependents.

Finally, before leaving this topic, it is probably worth pointing out, as Legacy representatives have contended, that there is a very definite need for organisations to have specialist

practitioners fully conversant and experienced in dealing with the particular needs and approaches required by dependents of veterans.

### *Access and equity for veterans or their dependents who are living in rural or remote settings*

A clear special access need arises because of the size of the Australian continent and the fact that veterans and their dependents are scattered. There are of course some notable areas of high concentration of the target population for veterans' affairs. But it is quite clear from this evaluation that particular efforts need to be made to ensure that those living in rural and remote areas are not disadvantaged.

The BEST Managers' survey contained the question:

**'Mention was made in some of the focus groups, that ESO's operating in more geographically scattered areas do not benefit so much from the BEST program. Do you agree? In what way? What could be done to overcome these problems?'**

Their responses were as follows.

- *Not at all in respect of the Regional Centres. Smaller eg single operators find it difficult to obtain funding due to the constraints of BEST*
- *Yes. They tend to service smaller numbers of veterans and therefore have more trouble justifying the expense of equipment provision. If they are not already 'in the system', lack of funding support will ensure they never receive BEST assistance.*
- *Do not agree. Several rural and remote funded in this State. Application forms are sent out to those ESO's who have pension officers - given some extra weighting on matrix.*
- *This is true, as it appears that these organisations do not make up the majority of applications. However, if they do apply the Dept does have a commitment to rural and remote Shires.*

### *Access and equity for all ex service organisations*

There is a certain inevitability about inequity when there is a limit to the amount of money that is available under a funding program. Not everybody who seeks some financial assistance will be able to receive it. It is no surprise that some ESO representatives expressed frustration and disappointment at not being successful in their applications for a BEST grant.

The limited amount of available funding results also in a tension between access and equity on the one hand and efficiency and effectiveness on the other. The demands of equity and access for ESO's suggest that all ESO's who have a legitimate claim on BEST funding should have an equal right to being funded. But clearly some of those smaller ESO's process so few claims that the interests of efficiency and effectiveness are not being served by giving them an equal share.

A common compromise in these situations, and one that appears to have been used in the BEST program is that the amount sought by some organisations has been reduced in order to fund others who might otherwise miss out altogether.

The evaluators, as is explained elsewhere, suspect that if more focussed and targeted funding strategies were to be adopted, then some of these tensions may be eased.

*Examples of strategies that are in mind.*

Provide every ESO where there is a major commitment to providing claims assistance to veterans or war widows and their families, with the best possible electronic access to information that is relevant to completing quality primary claims;

Overcome the difficulties characteristic of rural and remote practitioners seeking to service significant numbers of isolated veterans, widows or eligible families

(This would mean a subtle shift to having a focus on making electronic data access available to all pension officers and advocates who have satisfactory levels of TIP training and access to privately owned computers.)

Provide assistance to organisations developing and implementing a professional claims assistance service to veterans and widows/families of widows without prejudice and including a quality control process.

(This would include as one of the criteria, evidence of commitment to raising the standard of practitioner advice and assistance given to veterans.)

Almost any kind of serious consideration of access and equity requires a degree of mapping of program impact. We understand that ESOs in at least one State have undertaken some mapping of veterans and ESO coverage. This information would be relevant for funding strategies to do with access and equity.

### ***Appropriateness***

Appropriateness, as a subset of effectiveness is defined in terms of how well service delivery directly meets clients needs. The clients in the case of the BEST funding program are ESO's and through them the veteran community.

The program and its funds are directed to *bona fide* ESO's. The service delivery can hardly be any more direct, and there can be no question that the program is assisting these ESO's.

But the aim is also to help veterans (and their dependants) in making claims and lodging appeals. On this point, there would be unanimous agreement that the program has been and is fulfilling its aim - veterans are being assisted. An ideal way of assessing the extent to which veterans are satisfied with the kind of assistance being offered, would be to conduct a survey of those veterans who are seeking help through

ESO's. Indeed this might be a proposition that the Department should seriously address as part of the funding agreement – that a short satisfaction survey be completed by clients being assisted by a funded ESO, and submitted independently to a central address for analysis. To make this a continuous requirement would be onerous for an analyst, but it might be done randomly at pre-selected time periods or by using the “snap shot” approach in one State at a time at say 2 monthly intervals.

Furthermore the results of such a survey of veterans, which could be directed back to the Department, might be compared with a sample survey of those veterans who submit claims without representation for further evidence that representation is of real value.

### **Quality**

The primary issue here is to do with the quality of the BEST program, rather than the quality of claims at the primary level, which has been, addressed elsewhere.

The definition used by SCRCSSP for ‘quality’ in the context of government service provision is *fitness for purpose*. We quote from their explanation:

*A comprehensive assessment of this fitness requires a range of indicators. Ideally, such indicators directly capture the quality of outcomes – that is, whether the service achieves the objectives of government. Assessment may also involve seeking the views of clients and others with a legitimate interest in service quality. (SCRCSSP, 2000, p.13)*

It presumably also bears on the issue of whether there are other ways of achieving the ultimate purpose for which the funding is provided.

In endeavouring to reach a conclusion on this aspect, we have considered the following:

1. Is there evidence that the ESO's appreciate and benefit from the program?
2. Have there been complaints from either ESO's or veterans (and dependents) about the program addressed to either the Department or the Minister?
3. Are relations between the ESO's and the veterans they represent, and the Department enhanced by the BEST program?
4. Is the service being offered by the ESO's as a result of BEST funding becoming more professional?

Some of the most tangible evidence on this question is to be found in letters addressed to the Minister. Letters of support are the most common relevant written communication with the Minister. These letters of support are usually from the local MP member endorsing the positive work that ESO's carry out and reinforcing the need for funds/additional funds etc.

Disappointment has also been expressed in letters to the Minister from ESO's that felt they had received inadequate funding or no funding etc and the implications that this would have for their veteran client base.

A few concerns were raised also in letters to the Minister about 'inadequacy' or 'unfairness' of funding. Some ESO's, for example, said it was a case of 'first in' ESO's who were the winners. Those ESO's who didn't put in an application in Round 1 would always be behind those earlier approved ESO recipients. There would appear to be some substance to this perception – which we address elsewhere.

Furthermore, a few ESO's said the selection matrix should be far broader and make more allowance for the 'welfare' factor. Selection should, also, some claimed, be more based on 'performance'. The feeling in these cases is that the selection matrix needs to be handled with greater flexibility and address more of the 'real issues'.

Of relevance also to quality in this broader context of the whole BEST program, we report on two issues that were investigated as part of the evaluation. They are:

1. Agreements struck between the Department and the funded ESO's; and
2. Reporting requirements

### *Agreements*

Agreements between the Department and funded providers are one means by which the purchaser can have some control over the level of quality. We therefore asked both ESO respondents and BEST Managers about the Agreement that governs the use of BEST Funds asking whether there were any problems with the content, style or fulfilment of the Agreement. ESO responses were as follows:

- Eleven respondents (14%) did not answer the Question.
- Forty-six (58%), had no problems with content, style or fulfilment of the agreement.
- Twenty-three ESO respondents had some problems with the content style or fulfilment of the agreement.

The main issues raised, listed in the table following, were in relation to quarterly reports, where the view expressed by 3 agencies that 6 monthly reports would be a more efficient use of time and would assist those agencies that closed in December/January.

Other concerns were about the complexity and verbosity of the agreement (often considering the small amount of funding involved).

**Table 28: ESO respondent concerns with the formal agreements between DVA and BEST grant recipients**

- 
- Length;
  - Need to be enforced;
  - Horses for courses. Depending on the degree of assistance provided, agreements should be tailored to cater;
  - Fulfilment of the agreement in regard to Quarterly reports. Should be reported on a half-yearly basis. Some ESO's close from Mid-Dec 'til Mid-Jan making reports 2-3 weeks late;
  - Too complex for small amount of funding received;
  - Too longwinded. A simple letter of offer and acceptance - one page should suffice!
  - Double posting for signature;
  - Format is confusing - with having to re apply for equipment each year;
  - Rather formal;
  - Creates too many hassles;
  - Too verbose - needs to be simplified. Some terminology not completely understood by ESO's;
  - Less 'legalese' in the contract would stop confusing interpretations;
  - Acceptable, however a clause should be inserted prohibiting charging applicants for services;
  - Why auction superseded (but serviceable) ex- govt equipment? Reallocate through BEST.
- 

BEST Manager replies to the same question were as follows:

- *The agreements are too cumbersome, too legalistic and too many. The performance agreements are of much more value;*
- *No There is local experience with the management of agreements under the Veterans Community Grants Programme. This experience translates readily to the BEST agreements;*
- *Yes. Many find the Agreements daunting. They have trouble keeping statistics and providing acquittals etc. We need to keep it simple;*
- *No problems with managing, however, these documents are lengthy and complicated and this is a problem for ESO's especially where the grant is very small. ESO's find it difficult in some instances to deal with large amounts of paperwork due to complexity and changes in staffing etc.*

A question was also asked of both ESO representatives and BEST Managers about the reporting requirements.

- Thirty-three (41.25%) ESO respondents indicated that they do not need the reporting process to be changed, though one ESO without administrative support said that getting the report in punctually can be a problem when there is pressure to give preference to veterans, rather than produce statistics;
- Sixteen ESO's (20%) did not respond to the question;

- The remaining 31 ESO had various comments about how the reporting system could be improved. These comments are presented in the following table.

**Table 29: ESO respondent comments about how the BEST Program reporting requirement could be improved**

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- Collection of statistics by DVA not ESO's;
  - Insisting that reporting rules be adhered to;
  - New software package called the Veteran Practitioner Activity Database (VPAD);
  - Reduce and simplify the returns required and electronic lodgement;
  - Introduce stepped reporting requirements depending on amount and kind of grant;
  - Part of current quarterly report considered meaningless eg "number of times computer used";
  - Consistency of information requirements from Govt and auspicing bodies eg fiscal versus calendar year, quarterly reports compatible to DVA yearly reports;
  - The periodic report on claims statistics does not cover all aspects of the application of BEST grants;
  - Nowhere to record outcomes on forms;
  - No feedback from people ESO's report to;
  - A standard format should be available.
- 

More than half of the ESO's that wanted the reporting system to be improved were strongly in support of a simplification and reduction in the data to be collected and many anticipated the release of newly developed computer software (VPAD) would enable this simplification.

We understand that there will be extensive VISE training provided to ESO users of the system and that VPAD will be a 'very easy to use system with orientation and navigation issues being of particular concern...' (Department email).

While *prima facie* the introduction of the VPAD database will make the reporting process more standardised, there may be an unanticipated problem with this. The program will doubtless suit those practitioners who are fully 'at home' with computer technology, but older practitioners and those not so comfortable with computers could well find VPAD not to their liking and persist with older methods of reporting. Some ESO representatives to whom we have spoken have indicated that they do not intend to use VPAD. This view, of course, might change when the system is available.

This is doubtless acceptable to DVA who will not want to disadvantage any practitioners. It will mean, however, that there will be a *de facto* dual (or multiple) reporting system in place with potential problems in pulling it all together.

BEST Managers offered the following comments on the existing reporting process:

- *The timing is dreadful due to the lag between grants. Acquittal is also a problem as eg RSL do their accounts on the calendar year not the financial year. I receive quarterly reports from all BEST recipients. The Regional Centres do theirs on time. I have to chase some others;*
- *Need to continually follow up report submission; ensuring that information is accurate;*
- *Change of office bearers a big problem. Lack of reports provided - reminders need to be sent; cost of audits - could be made simple and audit required only for grants over \$10,000; Monitoring - maybe less often for smaller grants;*
- *Problems can occur where there are changes in staffing etc, and new officers unaware of reporting requirements. The others completing these documents are volunteers and do not have time/resources in some cases to report in a timely way.*

A further question to the BEST Managers asked about the usefulness of information currently required in determining the performance of the grant recipients or the program as a whole. Their answers follow:

- *It is useful in terms of numbers but not of quality. VPAD will assist in ensuring that all does counting;*
- *Not in WA. It is highly unlikely the information provided could ever be used to justify withdrawal of BEST services;*
- *Yes. Is of assistance when recommending next year's grants;*
- *The focus on reporting has been on the number of claims etc only. This information is of no value, as the numbers do not reflect quality and some orgs. have low numbers but have outstanding quality and/or provide high levels of assistance to the veteran community. No. of claims does not reflect the activity level of an ESO. In some States, I believe, only this type of data is collected. In NSW I have not adopted this approach and while these numbers are reported on in most cases, I have encouraged comment by the ESO's on the pensions and other activity conducted by the Org and have allowed each org to develop own reporting style to suit org, This helpful where there are time constraints.*

The evaluators believe that there is a tension for purchasers between 'letting go' of a service which is being outsourced and ensuring that it is being provided according to expectations. There is also a high level of concern that arises from the awareness that there are accountability and a duty—of—care requirements that remain with the purchaser in the public domain. There is, therefore, a necessity to strike a nice balance between giving providers freedom to manage and provide a service on the one hand, and requiring information that will enable adequate monitoring of the service.

It would appear to us that there is room for streamlining or simplifying the reporting process, but we hesitate to make specific recommendations on how or where this should be done.

Of relevance also to the issue of quality in the administration of the BEST program is information we obtained about funding matters. We asked ESO respondents whether there were issues to do with funding that were a concern to them.

Forty-five percent of the ESO respondents (36) had no issues of concern about funding arrangements. An almost equally number (31) expressed concern about funding arrangements, and the remainder gave no response at all.

The concerns expressed were mainly to do with delays in approval of funds and in the complexity of the reporting arrangements (10 agencies in each case). Other issues were raised as well and a complete list of these may be found below.

**Table 30: ESO respondent concerns to do with funding and funding arrangements in the BEST program**

- 
- Delays in approval of funding;
  - Too complex paper work and reporting;
  - Statistics could be gathered by DVA not by ESO's;
  - Lack of accountability and lack of support for staff who try to maintain some form of accountability;
  - More control and responsibility by the State TIP committee to make sure that the BEST grantees are value for money and will help the claims process;
  - Grant allocation should be given then the GST added over and above allocation;
  - Wage rises and superannuation rises information needed for budgeting;
  - Extra funding to cover bookkeeping costs;
  - Programs to make reporting easier;
  - Inequitable funding between ESO's based on volume and turnover;
  - Established Centres should be funded on a three year rolling arrangement;
  - Audited Tax returns are an extra cost burden.
- 

Funding for the BEST program is considered discretionary funding under the government's budgetary arrangements. It is therefore an annual allocation. Information received from the Department of Finance, however, indicates that there should be no or minimal delays in funding reaching ESO recipients, because DVA should have sufficient understanding of budgetary outcomes for it to proceed with arrangements for the allocation of funding in good time.

If this is the case, then it appears that DVA may need to examine its own processes in relation to the BEST funding allocations in order to eliminate those delays that are causing ESO's management stress.

BEST Managers were also invited to comment on funding arrangements that should in their opinion be addressed. Their comments are:

- *Yes. Issues with timing. Unlike CAGS, BEST does not allow for on going payment for salaries. Therefore the timing is dreadful due to the lag between grants. Acquittal is also a problem as eg RSL do their accounts on the calendar year not the financial year;*

- *There are no major issues in WA, except for the odd administrative problem that is generally addressed quickly;*
- *Payment process - if we can deposit direct into bank a/c ok. Bookkeeping - problems with change of ESO office bearers. Often change purpose of grant without permission;*
- *No - however, payments could be more timely if decision-making occurs in a timely way.*

BEST Managers also offered comments in relation to consumables including travel particularly, which are relevant here (**Are there any other issues with consumables that are a key to the BEST program fulfilling its aim and objectives?**):

- *Lack of funding. We have not offered travel, as we cannot afford it. It is an increasingly important factor, as many veterans require home visits due to age/infirmity. We have sometimes granted a few hundred dollars for consumable but this is inadequate.*
- *Some city-based ESO's requested assistance for parking costs, which was not approved.*
- *Consumables covers a multitude of 'costs' - most small ESO's prefer consumable funding to any other. They cannot get grants from other sources for consumables where they can for equipment. Rental should be allowed in consumables.*
- *Consumables can provide ESO's with assistance easing financial burden. I however believe that this item is the least useful except for travel. Should perhaps be limited to travel. Consumable usage is difficult for the org to report on quarterly and provides least input into quality claims (once again apart from travel)*

It seems clear from the following response results to a question about ESO's understanding the basis for decision-making in relation to which organisations receive grants, that the process (based around the grants matrix) is something of a mystery to many ESO respondents.

**Table 31: Extent to which ESO respondents understand the basis for decisions making in relation to which organisations receive BEST funding grants**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Fully	36 (45%)
Partly	24 (30%)
No	18 (22.5%)
No response	2 (2.5%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>

#### *Evaluators' summary observations*

It is our observation that there is room for refinement of both the agreements and the reporting procedures and for an improvement in the quality of funding arrangements. There is surely some 'common sense' in the suggestion, from those recipients of smaller grants, that a less cumbersome agreement would suffice. This is however a matter for legal experts.

Equally, we consider that some streamlining and focus is required in the reporting process. The question needs to be posed seriously about what information does the

department really require? This is certain to be answered in relation to the overall focus and strategy for assessing effectiveness and efficiency and the extent to which clearly stated performance indicators are available. Statistics that have not been used, and are unlikely to be used for any useful purpose should not be collected. In other words, there needs to be a carefully thought-through rationale for collecting, analysing, interpreting and using data.

Finally, it would appear, without a thorough investigation of this particular aspect, that the expeditious conduct of funding arrangements with ESO's, that are awaiting outcomes to their BEST applications, could be streamlined and improved appreciably within the Department.

### ***Inputs per output unit***

The approach taken by SCRCSSP and others to evaluating cost efficiency is to compute unit costs for services that are provided. We report an approach based on this philosophy.

There are two immediate possibilities for computing BEST unit costs in relation to the BEST program. They are to determine:

- (i) The cost to the government, per veteran (or dependent) assisted as a result of the program; or
- (ii) The cost per ESO assisted under the program

Under present statistics-keeping and reporting processes, it is not possible to report with any certainty how many veterans are being assisted because of BEST funding. It was reported to us that some veterans seek assistance, but then submit their own claims. Hence, to report this unit cost accurately would require a decision as to which approach is to be taken and then for a count to be kept on how many identifiable veterans (and dependents) were assisted under the chosen approach.

It should be noted also, that there are other costs involved in assisting a veteran or veteran's dependent to make a claim. Under the present system, there is a significant cost to the ESO. In this discussion we are referring only to the cost through BEST, of assisting a claimant. Other costs to the government are involved in TIP training, and in the production and maintenance of information such as is provided through SOP's. Since there are many other costs associated with helping veterans to make claims, this particular analysis of BEST unit costs per veteran making a claim, could be a rather meaningless approach. Yet, the evaluators felt that it was important to make the attempt since this is ultimately what the program is about.

It was reported earlier (Table 22) that 20,562 claims were processed since 1 February 2002, and of these, 11,967 were represented. If this number were to be taken as the basis for computing the BEST unit cost, it would result in an approximate figure of

\$810,000/11,967 (where the full cost of funding in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round is halved to be apportioned for the period Feb to present). The resultant unit cost to the government (society) per claim submitted on this basis is \$39.39.

SCRCSSP warns that there are usually other less obvious costs that need to be taken into account mainly to do with internal management of the funding program. Such costs are unknown to the evaluators and adding them into the equation would raise the unit cost. Further, an unknown proportion of the 11,967 claims used in the calculation would have been with representation from unfunded ESO's. This too would increase the calculated unit cost, but only marginally. Hence the cost to the BEST program of assisting a veteran (or dependent) to make a claim would appear to be around or less than \$50.

Members of the Steering Committee, especially those representing the ESO sector, were quick to point out that it would cost most ESO's significantly more than this to assist each veteran or dependent. They also pointed, quite rightly, that most claims-assistance work would require more than one meeting between the practitioner and a claimant. This is readily acknowledge, and it is not being suggested that \$50 is the total cost of providing assistance to a veteran to make a claim. What is being argued, is that for the BEST program, and taking into account the number of veterans assisted by ESOs, the cost per claim is of the order of \$50.

If our assumptions and calculations are correct, this would seem to be a very reasonable cost to the program. Other costs, such as the cost of TIP would need to be factored in to create a more accurate 'claim unit cost' to the government.

Taking the second approach, of computing the cost per funded ESO, the 'ESO unit cost', based on the same round three funding, is \$1,613,000/93 (the full funding amount divided by the number of grants made) which is \$17,344. This, in our opinion is a somewhat less meaningful statistic.

However, comparisons may be made across funding years for the BEST Program as follows, and shows that apart from the first year of funding, the 'ESO unit costs' (ie average cost per funded ESO) have reduced across the years of the program's existence.

**Table 32: ESO unit costs across the 4 years of BEST funding 1999 to 2002**

	1999 (Interim round excluded)	2000	2001	2002
Total allocated	\$646,500	\$1.613m	\$1.613m	\$1.64m
No of ESO's funded	61	85	93	113
Unit cost	\$10,598	\$18,976	\$17,344	\$14,513

These data strengthen our contention that the amount of money that is available for this funding program ought to be increased.

This 'unit cost', of course, is affected by both the amount of money available and the number of organisations receiving a grant. It is evident from the table above that the reason why the ESO unit cost has decreased, is that the number of funded organisations is increasing, from 61 in 1999 to nearly double, 113 in 2002.

Hence there are two ways of either maintaining or increasing this 'ESO unit cost' – increase the amount of money or decrease the number of organisations being funded.

### **Data from selected ESO organisations**

As part of the evaluation of BEST, the evaluation team was asked by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the BEST Evaluation Steering Committee to visit a few ESO's in the States, that are providing services to veterans of outstanding quality or innovative practice through the BEST program.

The names of a few ESO's, considered by the regional offices of the DVA to be providing service in ways that could provide others with useful models to consider were obtained. The evaluators then proceeded to visit or discuss at length the ways in which these organisations were structured and the approach they used in assisting veterans or their dependents. The approach was haphazard in one sense, but we felt that it, nevertheless, might give some inspiration to other ESO's which may be exploring new and improved ways of fulfilling what is clearly a difficult task.

No doubt there are a number of ESO's that could have been described in this section, but the constraints of time and the costs of travel were such that additional examples could not be included.

Four outstanding initiatives were visited or interviewed by phone. These include the Central Victorian Veterans' Support Centre based in Bendigo, the Gippsland Veterans' Welfare Centre based in Sale, Victoria and the Far South Coast Ex Service Pensioner Support Centre based in Bega, New South Wales.

The Evaluators were very impressed with the way in which these centres had developed organisations to streamline the way services to veterans were provided, while at the same time they all provided a very welcoming and friendly atmosphere, so that veterans felt at ease and realised that they were in the hands of highly experienced and professional staff with a sound code of ethics and protection for the privacy needs of their clients.

Some of the most notable highlights of the way the services were provided in these centres making them most successful examples of this kind of work, have been listed below:

- The volunteers get on well
- The Centres have a high success rate with claims
- No charges are made or donations requested
- They have a good quality relationship with DVA
- The Administrators are highly skilled
- Record keeping for management and other purposes has a high priority
- The Centres are not DVA, RSL or VVA, but serve all veterans
- They have an active program of welfare services
- Positive word of mouth promotion by satisfied veterans
- Offers a caring service
- Clients can be assured of confidentiality through the code of ethics
- All centres have been able to work cooperatively with other ESO's including Legacy
- One Centre (Sale) is responsible for TIP training for the whole of Victoria, does trouble shooting and initiates new centres
- The Centres are highly accessible in many ways to the veterans of the districts

### ***ESO organisation and partnerships***

While the manner in which ESO's organise themselves in order to provide pension assistance and advocacy is not a primary matter of importance to BEST Managers (apart from the fact that they should be *bona fide* ESO's in order to be eligible for funding), the topic did seem to be of more than passing interest. It may well be a clue to not just the quality of claims at the primary level; it might also hold a key to the level of service offered by an ESO to veterans. It also may be important for the future of pensions assistance to veterans in an environment in which voluntary service could be becoming difficult to sustain.

It goes without saying that current volunteers, on whom ESO's rely heavily for practitioner work, are getting very old, and less able/willing to contribute as they

have done in the past. There is also evidence in all voluntary organisations, that general willingness to engage as volunteers in social welfare activities, is declining.

In the particular case of assisting veterans with pensions assistance claims, there is the added and growing difficulty that flows from legislative changes and complexity.

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), in a review of appeals (ANAO, 2001) drew attention to this fact and urged the Department to set in place strategies to meet the possibility that there may not be sufficient volunteers to provide the service in the future.

It is conceivable that partnership activity could both provide a solution to diminishing numbers of volunteers and also contribute significantly to the quality of practitioner service available to veterans. There are economies to be had from enlarging the scale of an organisation, so joint activity could offer many benefits.

As a part of our evaluation, therefore, we sought information on whether ESO respondents were in joint partnership arrangements with other ESO organisations, what those arrangements were like, how they were of benefit and whether there were any problems with such combined activities.

Forty-seven of the 80 ESO respondents (58.75%) had some experience of joint practitioner activity ranging from loose networks to shared information and resources and combined “under one roof” experiences. In the main their experiences were very positive and they wanted others to consider the benefits of this approach. Rather than tabulate the very positive statements that were made by respondents about joint practitioner activity, we have taken a sample of responses and quoted them after removing identifying information. The statements speak for themselves.

- *Our organisation supports both Legacy and RSL members. This enables us to build up case histories of veterans and their dependents. We also liaise closely with the local Veterans Information Service run by Centrelink and the Veterans Community Support Service. Our offices are in the same building.*
- *To keep everyone involved in the joint activities informed and up to date. Hold regular workshops to identify and maintain our direction in regard to our clients needs.*
- *We meet on a regular monthly basis with other pension/welfare officers under the auspices of VAN. This interchange of information and ideas is worthwhile & beneficial. Consideration was give to joint practitioner activity but factors such as venues, dates/distance made it impractical.*
- *All ESO's here work together - approx 12 PO/Advocates.*
- *We share resources; networking; information sharing; knowledge sharing; expertise sharing; sharing facilities and IT equipment; in-house training; in-house forums; ESO group management Board meetings.*
- *Our group has been a joint organisation since day one. It was formed with the majority of ESO's within the district to maintain contact on a regular basis.*
- *You benefit from the knowledge of the more experienced advocates and case officers etc.*

- *We have full cooperation between sub branch and Legacy. My answer - try it!*
- *In consultation with other ESO's we have several practitioners assisting in other localities within the district. We also encourage isolated pension officers from smaller townships to contact our centre for assistance with welfare referrals and accessing computer based information.*
- *Cross-fertilisation of training/benefit of pooled experience; avoidance of duplication; mutual benefit is discussing/re-examining difficult cases.*
- *We have PO meetings on monthly basis including 6 other RSL/ESO areas. The meeting also has, with the assistance of VAN, had numerous meetings with DVA Officers, aged care, VVCS and welfare organisations.*
- *As the support ESO for 4 ESO's we feel the dissemination of information, quality of claim and needs of the veteran community can be much more easily achieved and it also limits the travelling required.*
- *At this sub-branch we have pension officers, welfare officers and advocates working together. Their PCs are networked and they communicate with regard to our clients.*
- *Moral support, backup, shared knowledge and debriefing are essential to the wellbeing of pension/welfare officers. Our centres provide this necessary support and we sincerely discourage anyone working alone.*
- *With ESO's suffering from aging of trained PO's and WO's, the centre program becomes necessary for veteran support in the future. The more vet support organisations co-located under one roof the more efficient welfare and pension systems will become and DVA BEST funding would be more efficiently used.*
- *If we were successful in our application for a grant, we would pursue this activity in the future.*
- *Being able to 'feed' off each other's expertise, less burnout, stress & pressure on individuals, no intrusion on family life. We are practitioners from a number of ESO's and we work well together in a cooperative venture.*
- *Our Centre represents several ESO's covering a wide area. Annual conferences of representatives of centres such as ours to exchange ideas, problem solving etc is of great value.*
- *We are currently working together with 14 sub branches and will soon be located with our district veterans support group RSL care community services.*
- *Several Legatees are also POs at other ESO organisations. This allows exchange of information and networking experience with pension claims as well as has assisted in exchange of pension claims for Legacy widows with other POs.*
- *The involvement of Advocates or Senior Pension Officers prior to sending in the primary claim' ensures that the claim has been completed correctly and all additional statements completed. This will speed up the claim.*

Eleven ESO's (13.75%) said they had had no experience of joint activity or the question was not applicable. A couple of ESO's said it would not work for them because they have different clients and different processes (widows). Another reason given for no co-operative effort was ESO remoteness from other centres. In one case an attempt to work together failed because an ESO could not comply with DVA requirements (?).

Obviously a significant proportion (nearly 60%) of ESO's can see the considerable benefits of sharing resources and aiming for a more efficient use of equipment, personnel and information. However, we acknowledge that there may be some old wounds slow to heal in some districts that make it hard for cooperative ventures.

We consider that there is much to be gained from cooperative arrangements, and would encourage ESO's to actively seek to find such benefits for their own operations. The time might also be opportune for the Department to also more deliberately foster these cooperative activities and the economies of scale that might eventuate through its funding strategies ie a review of the prioritisation matrix may be in order.

Some respondents saw a 'down' side to joint activity. Among the disadvantages that they saw were

- A possible threat to the confidentiality of records
- A loss of ESO identity – a threat to smaller organisations who could see themselves being 'taken over' by larger groups
- A reticence by veterans to seek help from a 'different' ex service organisation
- A perceived duplication of effort, conflicting advice and communication breakdowns
- A perceived shortage of computer equipment
- Increased travelling distance for some
- Possible conflict over the sharing of costs
- Its not practical - advocates work on different days not coinciding with others

In all 37 (46.25%) ESO respondents said that there were no disadvantages to veterans and their dependents from joint practitioner assistance. However, some ESO's qualified their responses with a number of "provided that..." statements, and these are listed below:

Provided that...

- *The practitioners work together for the benefit of the veterans and dependents*
- *As co-existence is not always the case, applications from stand-alone ESO centres should be encouraged.*
- *They have a very good working relationship so that the possibility of conflict is reduced.*
- *They have dedicated experienced, operators.*
- *That all practitioners/volunteers share the same level of expertise. Some POs are less competent than others.*
- *It does not dissipate the personal service to widows of veterans on which legacy is based".*

We believe that the answers to question 11 concerning the disadvantages for veterans and their dependants through joint practitioner activity support the recommendations made earlier about encouraging joint practitioner activity. The few disadvantages and qualifications that have been offered are primarily about quality control measures which can be addressed in the context of eligibility for grants. There seems to be strong and growing support from ESO's for joint practitioner activity, although one ESO (Legacy) through its representatives sees its role differently from veteran support programs and needing some special consideration.

BEST Managers were also asked about the benefits, if any, of joint pension assistance. Their answers were as follows:

- *The cooperative approach through the Regional Centres has generally ensured that there are not exclusive ties to one organisation so all needs can be catered for (eg some veterans will not go into an RSL but do go to a Regional Centre).*

- *There is only one 'joint' centre in our State. Probably the most significant benefit gained here is for the smaller groups to gain support and assistance from the RSL in particular with accommodation. It is also easier via BEST to assist them with admin support when they come together like this.*
- *Sharing of volunteers - being able to open longer hours sharing of resources; sharing of venue; networking opportunities*
- *Other's experience and knowledge can be of benefit. Also support where burnout and where pension officers unable to work due to medical conditions etc. Joint assistance also benefits smaller orgs who require computers etc but on own do not have large workload. Also of benefit to veteran is where a Vietnam veteran may not wish to deal with the RSL direct. Provides a one-stop shop approach where ESO's can tap in on experiences of other ESO's and provide better assistance to veterans/widows.*

**These same BEST Managers saw no disadvantages to joint pension activity between ESO's other than a perceived disadvantage by a veteran could be lack of privacy.**

In a similar manner, BEST Managers were asked for other *examples of good practice* that they may have observed in the ESO and support centre activities that come within the scope of the BEST funding program. The following were offered:

- *A one-stop shop approach where all the veterans needs can be addressed - claims, welfare, Centrelink, community services, health etc. Quick access to DVA due to the special relationship developed between DVA and Regional Centres. There is generally an excellent relationship with the local VAN and the ability to tap into local community services.*
- *Volunteer coordinator role - monitoring of workload of volunteers - rostering volunteers to enable them to enjoy 'time out'. ESO's must be reminded of their responsibilities to volunteers.*
- *Increased commitment from large city-based orgs to provide outreach services to regional areas/greater level of home visits etc/greater awareness and communication with the Dept/greater involvement in TIP*

## **Other possible applications of BEST funds**

BEST Managers were asked in their survey, **do you think that there are other uses for which BEST funding should be available?** Their replies were as follows:

- *Welfare work eg local community programs - say commemorative tree planting for volunteers, exercise, networking, company etc WA: Out of pocket travel expenses especially for rural ESO's in WA. These volunteers incur significant costs in this area, which are generally met from the volunteer's own resources.*
- *Rental - many centres want to be independent but cannot afford rental. Training - computer courses (basic).*

- *No- not for pension assistance, but probably should be explored again if there is an increased focus on welfare in the future*

## Adequacy of Program Funds

A number of stakeholders have expressed to us in the course of this evaluation their belief that there is not enough money in the program to enable it to do the job required. Some respondents, indeed, expressed anger at being involved in an evaluation because in their opinion *the government is not going to put more money into the program, and we know that these evaluations never make any difference!*

Each year there are insufficient funds to allow all applicants to receive a grant. The proportion of unsuccessful applicants for each of the BEST funding rounds has been as follows:

**Table 33: Proportion of unsuccessful BEST applicants in each round of the program**

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
37 (38%)	22 (20%)	12 (10%)	34 (23%)

The other useful statistic in assessing this question would be the proportion of ESO's receiving a reduced amount of funding in each round. Unfortunately this data was not accessible for the evaluators. The following information has been provided, however, in relation to round 4 (just completed).

**Table 34: Split of full and partial funding in round 4 (2002) of the BEST program**

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	
To receive full amount	14	2	8	0	1	1	26
To receive a reduced amount	27	3	36	9	11	1	87
<i>Totals</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>113</i>

We understand that this distribution is fairly typical of all rounds. We would be inclined to think, on the basis of other data that we have been able to report in this evaluation, that the number of ESO's receiving a reduced amount of funding will have increased over at least the last three rounds of the program. This is, of course, speculation.

There is also, doubtless, another factor at work which we would never be able to analyse, and that is whether organisations are consistently applying for an amount to match their exact needs, or whether they may be applying for more than they need in the hope of getting at least what they do need, even if they are unsuccessful in obtaining the full amount.

The disappointment expressed by unsuccessful applicant organisations is palpable. Many believe that the Government should increase the amount of money available. This is not an easy question to address.

The question might be more easily addressed if it were possible to determine how many ESO organisations there are in Australia that could be assisted by this funding program. But this is unknown, and by all accounts may be difficult to determine. Furthermore, many of the practitioners that are operating as pensions advisers (and many who are serving as Advocates) are servicing very small clientele. It cannot be either effective or efficient for the Government to fund every *bona fide* ESO or support group.

How many are there that do not apply, because they do not know about the program, or do not believe they would qualify, or prefer to simply manage on their own resources?

This question is also related to that other imponderable and unanswerable question as to how many veterans there may be 'out there' who would be eligible for a benefit or service but do not know that they may be eligible and will not, until they are informed of the possibility or given encouragement, make an application. Certainly there are widespread reports (and evidence) that the number of veterans seeking to make a claim is increasing. But this may not of itself be sufficient ground for arguing that the amount of funding in the BEST program needs to be increased.

#### Funding outcomes for respondents

We attempted to analyse the patterns (if any) in funding – in part to deal with the comment that we had encountered in focus groups, that those who were successful in the first round of BEST funding tended to keep on getting funded, and it was difficult for other ESO's to break into the funding process. The following table analysing the success patterns of just the ESO respondents, verifies this.

**Table 35: Analysis of ESO respondents' success patterns in receiving funding under the BEST program**

(Note: this is not an analysis of all ESO's receiving funding under the program)

		Number of same ESO's applying in each year & outcome			
<i>Cohort #, size and year started</i>		<i>Under CAGS</i>	<i>BEST Round 1 ie 1999</i>	<i>BEST Round 2 ie 2000</i>	<i>BEST Round 3 ie 2001</i>
<b>Cohort 1</b> 25 ESO's/ centres  Started under CAGS		25	22 of original	23 of original	24 of original
	received full amount requested	12 (48%)	8 (incl. one ESO that had been unsuccessful under CAGS)	11 (incl. the ESO that had been unsuccessful in 1999)	11 (the same 11 as got full amount in 2000)
	received <u>less than sought</u>	11	13	12 (11 got less than asked for in 1999 also)	12 (the same 12 as got less in 2000)
	were unsuccessful	2	1		1
	did not apply		3		
<b>Cohort 2</b> 27 ESO's/ centres  Started under Round 1 of BEST					
			27	23 of original	21 of original
received full amount requested			13 (48%)	12 (incl. an ESO that had been unsuccessful in 1999)	13 (12 as got full amount in 2000)
received <u>less than sought</u>			9	7 (7 got less than asked for in 1999 also)	7 (6 as got less in 2000)
were unsuccessful			3	4	1
did not apply				4	6
<i>Table continues on next page...</i>					
<b>Cohort 3</b> 25 ESO's/ centres  Started under Round 2 of BEST					
				16	15 of original
received full amount requested				8 (50%)	5 (5 as got full amount in 2000)
received <u>less than sought</u>				6	8 (6 as got less in 2000 plus 2 who got full \$)
were unsuccessful				1	2
did not apply					1
<b>Cohort 4</b> 10 ESO's/ centres  Started under Round 3 of BEST					
					10
received full amount requested					4 (40%)
received <u>less than sought</u>					4
were unsuccessful					2
did not apply					
		25	49	62	70

It is clear from this analysis that a very high proportion of those who receive funding in the year that they apply, continue to receive funding. (As noted elsewhere in this report, we believe that a contributory fact in this is that the computer leasing arrangements are for three years, and while ESO's need to re-apply each year to continue using the equipment, it is clearly much easier and less disruptive to allow the usage to continue than to reallocate the equipment.)

The issue of whether there is enough money in a program to allow its aim to be fulfilled as adequately and appropriately as possible, is a difficult one to answer. Once again, performance indicators would make this easier. Some relevant questions may be:

1. What coverage of ESO's (or more importantly veterans/dependents) is being achieved through the program?
2. Is any subset of the veteran community disadvantaged because of the current distribution of funding?
3. What backlogs of veterans seeking assistance exist in ESO's?
4. What particular elements of the program's overall operation would the Department consider are in need of strategic improvement or development?
5. What will be the financial implications of changing from a leasing arrangement with computers to one which involves outright purchase?

The evaluators have answers to none of the above questions. The first one is unanswerable because the number of eligible veterans 'out there' is not known. We find it hard to believe that the Department has not done some mapping of the veteran population. If we are right this would be useful in attempting an answer.

It clearly cannot be effective or efficient to fund every ESO Branch and sub-branch across the country, and it may not be defensible either to fund some larger ones. Nor would taxpayers in general consider it a good use of funds to support ESO's that are operating within the same geographical area, but servicing different populations when the same populations could be serviced by one ESO.

We nevertheless believe that there are indications that the program could be more effective and the Department enabled to make the outcomes of the program more tangible if there were more funding available.

- So that more organisations applying for funding will be successful, and more organisations will be able to get the full amount of funding that is demonstrably needed to enhance their service to veterans; and
- So that more might be done to bring about a higher quality of service overall from practitioner organisations (see subsequent recommendation).

The amount of funding should be increased to ensure that the 'ESO unit costs' do not deteriorate any further.

## Monitoring the program

Under purchaser-provider arrangements there is always going to be a monitoring requirement, because the purchaser will want to be satisfied that the purchased provisions fulfils the requirement and does it according to agreed standards. There is also the need to determine whether the purchases provision is developing in the intended direction. As well there may be the need to ensure that value for money is being obtained.

There is a clear desire for there to be a link in the case of the BEST program between funding and the quality of the service being funded, ie claims assistance, and welfare support.

### **Data from Department**

Data to help assess the performance of the program can and should come mainly from the department. There may need to be a capacity to merge data from two or more sources, e.g. data from claims assessment databases and TIP training database on the one hand and a simple database of funded ESOs on the other.

<b>Reason</b>	<b>What data/how achieve</b>
To be able to distinguish between outcomes from funded ESO's and non-funded ESO's; To be able as a result to assess value of funding for ESOs	Would require either that the ESO's self-identify on claims forms whether they are funded or not; OR That there are fields that can be linked (eg Representative ID from claims data) with a similar field in a BEST funding database of ESO's
To assess performance of TIP trained practitioners (by level) against those without (Not strictly BEST, but important because BEST insists on TIP trained practitioners. But also important for evaluating the impact of TIP anyway)	Would require ability to merge data from <u>claims databases</u> and <u>TIP training databases</u> . Would also require practitioners to self-identify on claims forms especially in those cases where an ESO submits bulk claims (In cases where there is a second stage filter/polish stage then presumably the final handling person is the one who accepts responsibility and should identify)
To assess impact of volume on outcomes (to inform funding strategies)	Volume might already be accessible for analysing relationship to outcome, but would require some subsidiary analysis - and from BEST's point of view needs to be links with data that distinguishes funded from non-funded ESO's at the same time.
To analyse aspects of data that	Need agreed definitions of 'quality', then would

come under agreed quality definitions for claims

require claims assessors to use some simple coding device to indicate where/why a claim is deficient (especially in cases where a claim needs to be returned for further work)

One or more of the following, depending on whether they relate to a particular funding strategy at the time

- to collect data about outcomes

At present, hardly any data is available on outcomes. The stated outcomes may need to be defined in quantitative terms. Outcomes, however, will inevitably mean obtaining data from the clients (ie veterans and their dependents)

- to collect data related to efficiency

It might be possible to obtain some kind of time-related/date-related data showing how long it takes for Department to process claims and relate that again to whether submitting ESO's are BEST funded or not

- To obtain data relating to access and equity

Some analysis is already done on ESO's that are rural or remote – this could be taken further to link with numbers of claims submitted by them (& outcomes and time taken etc)

### **Data from ESO's**

Need to ask the question as to why data is needed? It seems to us that there are three main reasons, as set out in the following table.

<b>Reason</b>	<b>What and how/when obtain</b>
To help assess applications for funding	Data from ESO's with application; Data from claims assessment database on past and current performance.
To fulfil accountability requirements	Evidence that money has been used as contracted: - Timely acquittals and end of year audited financial statement. <i>More than this would suggest an unwillingness to 'trust' the grantee to acquit the funds properly?</i>
To obtain data that cannot be acquired from Departmental sources in order to evaluate whether particular funding strategies are having the desired effect.	To both assess value and impact of funding; To help determine level of need for subsequent years; To quantify overall performance of program.

### ***Data for ESO's - feedback***

While it was relatively clear from the ESO survey that some organisations have created opportunities for feedback by establishing good relations with claims assessors, it has to be recognised that ESO's in remote or rural areas may not be able to establish that kind of relationship.

It is also acknowledged that TIP training is an important vehicle for feedback and is used as such by both TIP trainers and those attending training.

Quite apart from informal approaches that can be taken to obtain information, and TIP training it is desirable that some kind of regular structured feedback be available for ESO's particularly where feedback could be of help in improving aspects of practitioner support to veterans. This should be negotiated with Claims Assessors in consultation with ESO representatives.



# CONCLUSIONS

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**W**e have reserved our conclusions until this point in the report in order to present them as a concerted whole. Our evaluation activities have led us to the following assertions:

1. The program is an important though relatively small one which seeks to assist ESO's fulfil an intermediary linking role between veterans and the Department. The philosophy implicit in this arrangement is excellent. It helps to link Compensation staff and those who prepare legislation and guidelines such as Statements of Principle, and TIP providers with veterans and their dependents. It also demonstrates the Government's (and Department's) good will towards the veteran community.

One could also say that the program was ahead of its time, in that only recently has the significant value of peer support programs been recognised. A program that enables veterans and the relatives of veterans to support and assist their peers with lifestyle enhancement opportunities, for whatever reasons it was originally implemented, is now at an important stage of development. As peer support programs with the young and mutual support groups with adults are being encouraged to expand through government funded initiatives, so too the BEST program should be encouraged to improve and expand to reach out to more and more veterans, bringing them in touch with their entitlements.

2. The BEST program is one part of several strands of government assistance to ESO practitioners to enable them to better assist veterans and dependents. It works particularly closely with the TIP program on the one hand and the provision of information through SOP's and websites with relevant information. BEST can be examined in its own right, but more importantly it needs to be seen as an integral part of a combined and integrated provision.

3. It is reasonable that if the Government is providing taxpayer money to ESO's, there should be some tangible benefit not just to the ESO's and the veterans they assist, but also back to the department to help them be more proficient in handling pensions claims and appeals. Hence the interest in the program's guidelines about an improvement in the quality of claims is a legitimate expectation. It is our conclusion, however, that the kind of improvement sought needs to be spelt out more precisely.
4. Veterans do need assistance – even though many (in some states as many as 50% and more) make claims without ESO assistance – and appreciate having non-government people available to help. The basis for making claims is increasing technical, and it is unreasonable to expect the majority of veterans and their dependents to be familiar with the legislation and know how to get information and use it in preparing and making their claims (or appeals)
5. The data show that significantly more veterans are successful in obtaining a payment outcome from their claims when represented than when making a claim on their own. This does not in itself demonstrate that BEST funding is achieving its aim, though it is circumstantial, and at least demonstrates the correctness of the BEST aims.
6. We conclude that because represented claims are more likely to have a 'successful outcome', this result of our analyses should be made widely known, and veterans and dependents should be encouraged in promotional and advertising material to seek and use practitioner assistance when making a claim.
7. The most useful assistance from BEST funding to date has been in the area of providing computers and related equipment (scanners, printers, modems) and consumables (paper, Internet fees). The other intended benefits of the BEST program – employment of full time or part time paid pension/welfare practitioners, full time or part time administrative support staff, electronic lodgement facility, and travel and other equipment – have been either absent or fewer in number. Staff provisions, however, are more expensive to provide.
8. Travel costs are a significant problem where large territories are being covered. The strategy for assisting rural and remote veterans under BEST may need a level of analysis that we have not been able to undertake. The prioritisation matrix used by the State Offices in determining which BEST applicants should receive funding, does give additional weighting to those applicants that are servicing rural and remote veterans and dependents. From the comments we received, travel expenses are a significant burden. It also appears that not all ESO's that might make a claim on travel expenses are aware that they can do so. At the same time, it is clearly not efficient to fund several organisations to cover the same large territory.

9. There can be no dispute that the BEST program has helped ESO organisations to equip themselves to take full advantage of information through the Internet. How easily or well practitioners access that information was not covered in our evaluation, and may be worth investigating at a different time, and when it is clearer as to how or where practitioners could improve their advice and assistance overall.
10. There is a limit on the amount of money available, and therefore some applicants miss out on obtaining a grant, even though they may meet all of the eligibility criteria. They inevitably feel disadvantaged and even resentful at what appears to be discrimination. This limit on funding is exacerbated by the three-year rolling lease arrangement with computers, since that severely restricts the funding freedom that the Department might have to encourage other aspects of the program in any one year.
11. There is an implicit tension between access and equity on the one hand in the administration of the fund, and efficiency and effectiveness on the other. Access and equity would dictate that smaller and distant ESO's should be given a measure of positive discrimination. But from the perspective of overall effectiveness and efficiency there has to be a limit on how many organisations that process small numbers of claims each year, can be funded under BEST.
12. Although funding is only ever for one year at a time – a policy that causes those ESO's that do employ staff with their grants, significant problems retaining staff and keeping liquidity at the end of the funding period – there is an apparent bias in the program towards keeping functional those organisations that have already received funding in a previous round. (This seems in large measure related to computer leasing, but has other reasons.) Hence it is difficult and perceived to be difficult for those ESO's that have not previously received funding to break into the program.
13. It is not known how many ESO's there are, that might still wish to take advantage of the BEST funding program at some time in the future. Nor did the evaluators encounter any thinking about how to map the present coverage of ESO's, but it does seem to us that the issue of coverage is important both for access and equity considerations, and for policy decisions regarding how much money is needed in the program and which organisations should receive funding. A funding strategy that might bear some consideration is whether to fund new ESOs or support existing ESOs with a track record, to open outposts in other areas.
14. Because of the limited amount of money available, those DVA officers with the responsibility for assessing applications, must trade off between giving applicants the full amount that they require and seek, against bringing others into the recipient 'fold'. This can only be achieved by reducing the amount granted to applicants to below that which they have sought. An increase in the

amount of funding available for distribution would clearly diminish this problem, but would not eliminate it completely.

15. Also because there are inevitable inequities resulting from there being more requests than can be filled, it is prudent, in our opinion that there be clearly thought-through funding strategies. That is, we believe that funding could be more specifically directed in each year, to fill clearly identified needs, and 'steer' ESO development and provision in ways which will most benefit veterans across the entire country, as well as meeting obligations to be as efficient and effective as possible. Such funding strategies will only be possible if the Department frees itself from computer leasing arrangements.
16. We contend that there is a need for practitioners to be as professional as possible. There are multiple reasons for reaching this conclusion. A relatively mundane but real reason is that while some organisations appear not to be having any problem obtaining a steady flow of volunteers to do practitioner work, the pool of volunteers is dwindling. More important reasons are that the requirements for filling out appropriate claims are growing, and to achieve more efficiencies, practitioners must become more proficient themselves and more knowledgeable. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that the bulk of successful represented primary claims and appeals are being handled by a relatively small number of practitioners who are highly skilled, experienced and knowledgeable in fulfilling this role.

This could be seen as part of a natural progression towards a more professional level of service delivery. Training, as provided under the TIP arrangement should be encouraged and extended. At the same time, volunteers who are interested in providing a more professional service to veteran and veteran dependent clients might be encouraged by the Department to undertake appropriate certificate training in welfare servicing and community organisation governance so that ex service organisations become more accessible and more professional in the services they offer.

Many of the helping professions started out with volunteers who wanted to do "good", but it was eventually discovered that this was not sufficient and skilled vocational training, codes of ethics and practice related to theory became essential components of successfully fulfilling those helping roles.

17. It is apparent that there are quite large numbers of practitioners that provide claims assistance to small numbers of veterans or dependents. This is an observation from spreadsheets listing claims over a period close to a year and sorted by representative. It is hard to accept that a volunteer practitioner in a fluid environment, such as this, can maintain a sufficiently high standard of advice, when one or even just a few 'clients' are assisted in a 12 month period.

Doubtless these volunteers serve a very useful intermediary function for veterans, but to us this suggests that if a high quality practitioner service is

sought, then the solution may be with a two tiered system whereby volunteers support veterans in gathering the required information, but that a more experienced, perhaps paid, practitioner puts the material together in a quality claim. This approach is already in place in some ESO's. It appears that the ESO sector is at the point where a transition from fully voluntary activities to part-paid infrastructure could occur. As noted in the body of the report, other research has shown that for every 35 volunteers in a human service agency, one full time coordinator of volunteers was required to provide supervision, manage the records, deploy and roster, organise training, deal with crises, discipline, trouble-shooting etc. This may be a direction that ESO's need to consider more seriously and perhaps seek BEST funding to undertake.

18. The trend, apparently occurring spontaneously for ESO's to work together to provide an enhanced and broader service to veterans and dependents has benefits of many kinds and deserves encouragement. The Department, through selective BEST funding strategies, and through some perhaps new TIP modules on the development and management of combined structures could assist ESOs to work through the ramifications of this evolutionary process.
19. Our conclusion in relation to providing equipment, is that the leasing arrangements may have been useful in the beginning stages of the program but now present more problems than solutions. We would argue that the leasing arrangements should be phased out as terms expire, and replaced by a system in which ESO's be enabled to purchase their own equipment. ESO's should also take responsibility for finding suitable computer training, maintenance and upgrading of equipment.
20. We consider that electronic lodgement of claims would add value to the claims process, even though its present conception seems to be limited to a means for sending information into the Department electronically rather than by mail. We can envisage that the number of practitioners or veterans wanting to use this method of lodgement initially. But once the problems associated with lodgement have been overcome, the process has 'bedded down' and more people are using this process, there could be opportunity for exploiting the greater potential of computer technology in the assessment process. Pilot testing and clarification of its role and operation should be expedited.
21. The statistical monitoring of the program is currently inadequate. Some really telling information can be retrieved, but not easily. We would always encourage a continual monitoring of the program – a separate issue from monitoring fund recipients. The monitoring has to be tied to the claims processing activities. But this should not be haphazard, but a tight and effective data strategy should be developed so that the future emphases of the program can be matched to hard evidence emerging from the statistical collection.
22. VPAD will enable authorised users to record interview and claim assistance activity. It will provide activity reminders and automatically produce activity

reports for BEST quarterly reports. This information could be useful to ESO managers in its own right. Some of the usefulness of VPAD statistics will be offset for the Department by the fact that not every ESO will want to use the system. Without knowing more about VPAD, the evaluators are cautious about drawing conclusions over its usefulness. What we see as important is that there be the facility for making links between the claims assessment activity of the Department and the activity of BEST funded ESO's. We are uncertain as to whether this would be a function of VPAD.

# RECOMMENDATIONS - MAKING BEST BETTER

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**W**e have chosen to make a relatively small number of recommendations. Most of them is complex by nature and may require a considerable amount of work, if the recommendations are accepted, for implementation.

## **1 The program should be continued, and funding for it should be increased.**

The primary reason for recommending that the program be continued is that it is clearly serving a useful purpose for both the veteran community and the Department. There is clear, statistically significant evidence that having representation in the submission of claims increases the probability that veterans'/dependents' claims will receive funding.

We recommend that funding be increased for two reasons:

- So that more organisations applying for funding will be successful, and more organisations will be able to get the full amount of funding that is demonstrably needed to enhance their service to veterans; and
- So that more might be done to bring about a higher quality of service overall from practitioner organisations (see subsequent recommendation).

The amount of funding should be increased to ensure that the 'ESO unit costs' do not deteriorate any further.

Because the amount of BEST money that is being outlaid per claim is very modest, and significant costs are still be put into the claims and appeals processes by ESO's (raised in most part through voluntary contribution) we believe that an increase in overall funding would be well received in the

community and could have a significant effect on the successful outcomes of veteran claims.

**2 The stated aims, objectives, and outcomes should be examined in order to make them clearer and less ambiguous – particularly the objectives.**

As argued in the report, the lack of precision in the objectives stemming from the use, particularly, of the words ‘quality’ and ‘welfare’, could be overcome by developing more carefully worded objectives.

A more systematic analysis should also be undertaken of both the concept of quality and the factors that contribute to it. It has been clear to us from the outset that there are diverse interpretations of ‘quality’ and multiple factors contributing to it. There has been a tendency among stakeholders, it seems to us, to treat the matter as ‘too hard’. We do not support this view. Our evaluation, though limited by the amount of statistical information that we could obtain in the time frame of the evaluation, has demonstrated beyond doubt that the concept of ‘quality’ can be defined, can be the subject of targeted objectives for the program, can be measured, and can be influenced by the careful application of BEST funding.

Both the understanding and monitoring of the program would be improved also if performance indicators were to be developed.

**3 More specific funding strategies should be introduced in order to direct the available funds towards the achievement of specific goals, including welfare goals when they are clarified.**

Currently, the funding strategy is implicit in three things:

- Funding criteria;
- Applications to which funding may be put; and
- The emphases given differential weighting in the prioritisation matrix.

We believe that ‘effectiveness’ should be given a fuller definition, such as that in the SCRCSSP reports, and that in the light of factors such as outcome, appropriateness, access and equity, and quality, funding strategies be changed from round to round in order to strategically and systematically influence the BEST program outcomes to improve the program’s overall performance.

Useful input to such funding strategies could come from analysis of such data as already exists in relation to practitioners and claims outcomes.

A broader, and perhaps more important issue, is that there is no existing philosophy on which ESO’s should be funded in each new round (discussed under Conclusion 11). Perhaps the Department should seek to have discussions with ESO representatives to try and determine an accepted

approach to funding under the next round of BEST, addressing some of the deeper philosophical considerations to do with funding strategy.

**4 More 'openness' should accompany the funding decision process.**

It was apparent that many ESO's did not understand or fully understand the method by which funding applications were assessed – which is like applying for a job without knowing what the selection criteria are. In particular many expressed ignorance of the decision matrix which is used by State offices in making their assessments of applications and consequent recommendations to central office.

If the Department is to introduce more specific funding strategies, in order to deliberately encourage development and improvement in ESO advice and advocacy, then those funding strategies will need to be transparent or run the risk of failure to achieve their intended goals.

**5 The current leasing approach to equipment should be replaced by computer purchase arrangements.**

There is both a high level of dissatisfaction in the sector with aspects of the program and more importantly an apparently crippling effect from the lease arrangements on the flexibility of funding under the program.

Computer equipment and Internet access are demonstrably useful for ESO's and support centres, but this could be handled by one off grants from the Department. It would also seem that some ESO's, if not most, would be better off if they could make their own arrangements for help and maintenance of equipment with a local company. The need for uniformity of equipment is not great, though there are specifications that need to be met if electronic communication with the Department is to be without difficulty.

While we have no way of knowing when it may occur, there must be a threshold point at which funds being put into equipment ceases to be as useful as putting money into staffing and training support. So long as leasing on 3-year cycles is the dominant pattern for equipment provision, the ability of the Department to move funding from equipment to human resource management or to bring other ESO's into the funding provision, will be hampered.

**6 A restructured monitoring strategy should be put in place (a) to implement a more efficient process to ensure that ESOs fulfil their requirements and are accountable, and (b) to monitor the program as a whole in relation to its objectives.**

Although many funded ESO's were happy with reporting requirements, it did seem to us that the reporting requirements were not well thought through, and

inclined to be unnecessarily burdensome for smaller ESO's. Some of the ESO gathered statistics appeared to 'go nowhere' - ie were not used for any self-evident monitoring purpose. It seems to us that the Department may need to reconsider the reporting requirement, asking what it really must have, by way of information (and for what purpose) and to reduce the information required to an absolute minimum.

It is our contention that performance indicators must be defined if useful, quantifiable monitoring and evaluation of the BEST program is to take place. It is then important that once these have been defined, and the uncertainty around words such as 'quality' and 'welfare' has been removed, that a more focused data collection strategy be designed and implemented.

Data need to be systematically collected that will allow conclusions to be drawn about where quality of primary claims is in need of improvement, and which ESO practitioners may need help to bring about this improvement. This information in turn can inform funding strategies.

Claims assessors have an important role to play in the data collection. It is our view that the coding or data capture that they might be required to do will not impose intrusive overheads on their time. It seems strange to us, that the 'improvement of the quality of claims at the primary determining level' should be an objective of BEST funding and yet claims assessors contend that they cannot tell which claims have been assisted by a BEST funded ESO. How then can anyone tell whether BEST support is having the desired effect?

The Department's data systems ought to be used to make analyses of the kind that have been undertaken in this review. Even with quite small changes to existing data capture in the Department, a wealth of more useful information could be obtained to shed light on inefficiency and ineffectiveness within the claims/appeals system. We urge the Department to make these changes and require that more systematic but relevant data be collected.

**7 Analysis of practitioner contribution to the quality of claims should be undertaken and the results of that analysis used to inform training and development strategies.**

The evaluation did not ask that we assess the quality of practitioner work. Yet it was plain to see that practitioner advice and assistance is highly variable. This is due to at least the following factors:

- Pensions assistance is primarily a volunteer activity;
- Practitioner skill and experience is highly variable;

We also received reports that indicate that some practitioners are not as capable or well informed as others, and that not all practitioners are TIP trained (even in funded organisations) despite this being a requirement of BEST funding. This

variability between volunteers is typical of organisations that rely so heavily on voluntary contributions.

We have been assured that veteran and dependent's claims stand or fall on the contention that is made, and that it is unlikely that claims do not succeed because a practitioner failed to give proper advice or assistance.

It seems certain, however, that the proficiency of the claims process could be improved. Without more detailed and specific information from claims assessors about claims and the role that practitioners might have in areas where claims are deficient, it is, of course, not possible to be definite about the extent of improvement that might reasonably be expected in the performance of pensions advice.

Better quality practitioner assistance and more consistency in quality across practitioners is in everybody's best interest. It will be more useful to veterans and dependents making claims. It will also assist the Department to improve the proficiency of the claims (and appeals) processes.

We believe that more practitioners should be training to higher levels under TIP, that the TIP training requirement should be enforced as a prerequisite for BEST funding and that the scope of training should be broadened either as part of TIP or as a funded option under BEST so that practitioners can offer a more professional level of assistance.

This may require an increase in strategic funding to enable a higher level of administrative support where this can be shown to be critical to an ESO's improved service.

Other volunteer organisations known to the evaluators are concerned that the significant responsibility resting on the shoulders of volunteers is increasing, as is the litigious nature of our society. There is also the move towards core competencies, as part of the national training agenda now for nearly a decade. This was instituted in part to overcome the disparity between service providers and to ensure that proper standards were maintained in the delivery of training services. Our suggestion that the Department should consider in consultation with ESO peak bodies, the advisability of moving towards an accreditation/registration path for practitioners and *bona fide* ESO's seeking funding under BEST, met with a degree of disagreement on what appeared to be legitimate grounds, not least of which was that the age of volunteers in this sector makes accreditation/registration unattractive.

We cannot escape the conclusion, however, that practitioners are providing advice and assistance which could have very significant consequences for veterans and dependents. A professional standard of guidance is required. The time might be rapidly approaching when willing and aging volunteers can no longer be expected to provide the level of advice that is required.

We also see a longer-term solution to both the quality of the service provision and the changing availability of volunteers in the employment of full or part time professional practitioners. It is our opinion that the 'market' has already moved in this direction with the establishment of support centres, and the overt readiness of ESO's to work together to raise the standard of the services they provide.

A solution hinted at in our conclusions is that ESO's should be encouraged to develop tiered arrangements for pensions and benefits claim processing. Some organisations have already moved this way. We believe both veterans and the Department stand to benefit from such a system in which claim material may be gathered by perhaps less qualified voluntary practitioners, but then checked and polished by more highly qualified personnel before submission.

## **8 More systematic feedback processes should be implemented**

Good quality information is being made available and training is provided through TIP. In some cases very good relations exist between ESOs and claims assessors. But this is by no means uniform. There is room for improvement in the relationships between Claims Assessors and practitioners 'across the board' and for regular feedback processes to be implemented.

We would even go so far as to suggest that where there are ESO's or practitioners that are consistently showing scope for improvement, then a feedback process should be implemented to help the organisation or practitioners to see where improvements might be made.

## **References**

- Australian National Audit Office, (2001). *Review of Veterans' Appeals Against Disability Compensation Entitlement Decisions*. AusInfo: Canberra.
- PALM Management, (1998). *Working Together: An external evaluation of the Training and Information Program (TIP) and the Claims Assistance Grants Scheme (CAGS)*. Canberra (Unpublished).
- Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, (2000). *Report on Government Services 2000*: Productivity Commission, Melbourne.



## Attachment A: Funding Recipient Survey

### Evaluation of the Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) Program.

#### FUNDING RECIPIENT SURVEY

We would like to receive the completed surveys no later than **5 June 2002** so that processing and analysis can be completed according to the evaluation timetable. Your assistance will be very much appreciated.

This survey is intended for all organisations, whether TESO or veterans' pension assistance centre, that have applied at some time during the last 3 years for BEST funding – even if the application was unsuccessful.

The survey is confidential. Information from this survey will be aggregated in our report.

We only require one completed survey for each organisation. We leave it to you as to how you do this in those cases where there are several practitioners involved. You may, for instance, complete the survey as a manager on behalf of the staff and volunteers, or you may call a meeting and complete the survey as a joint exercise – or something in between. The important point, from our position, is that the replies truly represent the views of the organisation named below.

The questions in the survey have been prepared by the evaluation consultants, and approved by the evaluation steering committee on which ESO's and veterans are represented.

The survey is aimed at obtaining information about a range of issues to do with the Program, such as whether:

- the program is achieving its aim;
- it is doing this as efficiently as possible;
- it is doing so as effectively as possible;
- the quality of claims being received by DVA at the primary determining level is improving;
- the rate of appeals to the Veterans' Review Board (VRB) and/or the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) is reducing;
- the electronic lodgement of appeals is being promoted;
- the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants is being promoted.

It is also seeking to obtain information and suggestions about how to improve the impact of the BEST funding program.

Further, it is seeking information about the future role of BEST and strategies to ensure that veterans and their families continue to receive a high level of support in making claims for pension assistance.

We ask you to keep in mind the context of the BEST funding program which is the legislation that enables support to be given to veterans and their dependents, and the processes by which veterans and their dependents may make a claim to receive a pension or to increase the amount of pension that they receive. The Department has recognised the value in having pension/welfare officers, case officers and advocates available to assist veterans and their dependents in making a primary claim or appealing the decisions that are made by departmental staffs.

Accordingly, the BEST Program was established to provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers. (Best Program Guidelines, 1.2)

The survey is not about Training & Information Program (TIP) even though the two programs complement each other and both programs have the same general aims. The survey is a key part of an evaluation of the Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) Program.

Your organisation's experience and opinions about how to develop the BEST program are vital to the evaluation.

☺☺☺

IF AT ANY STAGE YOU RUN OUT OF SPACE, PLEASE ATTACH AN EXTRA PAGE WITH THE QUESTION NUMBER CLEARLY IDENTIFIED.

**Please complete the following.**

Name of the organisation on whose behalf you are responding:

Your name and contact number (only to be used if we need to clarify any of the answers you provide):

Name  phone or mobile

Position

In which years has the organisation (ESO or centre) on whose behalf you are responding, applied for a BEST funding grant?

Year applied please tick year(s) when you applied for a grant	(please indicate the outcome of your application)		
	Received full amount	Received a reduced amount	Application was not successful
	↓	↓	↓
<1999 (CAGS*) <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1999 <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2000 <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2001 <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2002 <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\* CAGS = Claims Assistance Grants Scheme

1. Whether the aim of the BEST program is being achieved or not, could be answered in many specific ways, but in general terms, would you say (from your involvement in activities that are to do with BEST funding support – and whether your particular organisation has received a grant or not) that:

[Please tick ONE box]

- BEST's aim is being achieved to an outstanding degree
- BEST's aim is being achieved to a very high degree
- BEST's aim is being achieved to a high degree
- BEST's aim is being achieved to a poor degree
- BEST's aim is being achieved to a very poor degree
- BEST's aim is being achieved to an outstandingly poor degree
- Not in a position to make this judgment

2. From your experience and observation, is the BEST program:

- Better than CAGS (a program in operation before BEST)  <sup>1</sup>
- About the same as CAGS  <sup>2</sup>
- Not as good as CAGS  <sup>3</sup>
- Filling a different role entirely, can't compare them  <sup>4</sup>
- Had no experience of CAGS  <sup>5</sup>

If you ticked box 3 above, could you please explain why it is not as good:

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3. Keeping in mind what the BEST program is intended to do, are there changes that should be made to either: what things can receive funding in the guidelines; or the criteria for making grants?

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***Now looking at some specifics***

One of the objectives of the BEST program is to “improve the quality of claims received at the primary determining level and assist ESO’s in achieving this objective” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

4. If your organisation has received a BEST grant, has there been an improvement in the quality of primary claims submitted by your client veterans or their families and if yes, in what way?

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5. If your organisation has been unsuccessful in getting a BEST grant, in what ways do you consider that the quality of primary claims being submitted with the help of officers from your organisation would have improved as a result of receiving BEST funding?

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A second objective of the BEST program is to “reduce the rate of appeals to the Veterans’ Review Board (VRB)” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

6a. If your organisation has been successful in getting a BEST grant, in what way has it contributed (if at all) to a reduction in the number of appeals from your veterans or their dependants who have used your organisation for making a claim/appeal?

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6b. If you have not been successful in obtaining a BEST grant, how would you expect such a grant to reduce the rate of appeals to the VRB by your client veterans and dependants?

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The third objective of the BEST program is to “Promote the use of electronic lodgement of claims” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

It is acknowledged that electronic lodgement of claims has not occurred as yet. It would be useful, however to have your views on the following two questions:

7. How eager would you be to use electronic lodgement with and on behalf of your clients?

- Very interested and eager
- Quite interested and eager
- Only moderately interested and eager
- Not at all interested or eager
- Opposed to the idea

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8. How do you think electronic lodgement, if introduced, would benefit you, your clients, or the process of making claims for pension assistance?

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The final objective of the BEST program is to “Promote the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

9. Has your organisation been able to conduct any welfare work as a result of receiving a BEST grant? If so what work has been done?

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**Eligibility for funding**

The BEST Program Guidelines make it clear that to be eligible for funding, organisations must be either a *bona fide* ESO or an ESO support centre. ESO practitioners and ESO's that are working together have made joint applications in several parts of Australia. Pensions and welfare officers and advocates may benefit from each other's experience and knowledge when working together (resulting in better quality claims), and also because efficiencies may be gained from economies of scale. There is clearly an emerging interest being shown by ESO's in working together.

10. If you have had experience in some form of continuing joint practitioner activity, what aspects of that joint activity would you most encourage others to consider?

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11. What disadvantages (for veterans and their dependants), if any, do you see in joint practitioner assistance?

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**Funding purposes.**

As the guidelines indicate (Paragraph 3.1.e) the BEST program will provide grants for a range of things.

12a. If you have been funded under BEST, what were you funded for? (*tick as many as necessary*)

- full time or part time paid pension/welfare/advocate-practitioners
- full time or part time paid administrative support staff
- leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences
- consumables etc.
- Other (please describe).....

12b. Which of these do you feel has been the most useful for your organisation (Please ignore this question if you have not received funding)?

*Number from 1 = most useful to 4 = least useful  
If necessary number two or more as equal*

- full time or part time paid pension/welfare/advocate practitioners
- full time or part time paid administrative support staff
- leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences
- consumables etc.

13. If your organisation has not been funded, which of these did you feel you most needed in order to do your work more effectively and efficiently?

full time or part time paid pension/welfare/advocate-practitioners

full time or part time paid administrative support staff

leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences

consumables etc.

Other (please describe).....

**If your organisation has not received any funding, please go now to question no 20**

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**Equipment**

Funding has been provided, where requested and where deemed appropriate, for a range of support equipment and services, such as desktop/laptop computers, monitors, printers, copiers, modems; installation and maintenance; training; Internet access and support.

14. In general this provision by the government has been well received and treated as a valuable aid to the work of pension claims assistance. Some issues, however, have been raised with the evaluators. Which aspects of the equipment provision do you feel need to be changed to make the provision more effective and efficient? (Please ignore if you have not received funding).

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**Agreement (contract) with Department for the use of the funding**

15. A comprehensive Agreement is drawn up between, and signed by, the Department and funding recipients. Does your organisation have any problems with the content, style or fulfilment of the Agreement? (Please ignore this question if you have not received funding)?

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**Funding arrangements**

16. Are there issues to do with the funding arrangements that are of concern to you? (Payment process, bookkeeping etc – again, please ignore this question if you have not received funding.) If so, please describe.

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**Reporting**

The Department, as funding authority, has a requirement to monitor and report to Parliament on the spending of BEST money. Obtaining information from the funding recipients is an important part of this monitoring and reporting function.

17. Are there any ways in which you consider that the reporting process might be improved? (Please ignore this question if you have not received funding)

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**Feedback**

Our discussions with ESO's in the States have led us to believe that there is a need for more feedback from the Department on the quality of primary claims, additional information supplied for the purposes of Section 31 reviews and the quality of appeal preparation to enable the ESO's to make adjustments to their services to enhance quality outcomes for veterans.

18. Does your organisation have any comments about this issue?

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From our inquiries so far, it seems that more veterans are finding out about their entitlements, and are becoming more favourably disposed towards seeking help with their claims from ESO's and Veterans' Centres.

19. Please comment on your organisation's experiences in this regard to these two issues.

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**Basis of BEST grants decision-making**

20. Does your organisation understand the basis for decision-making in relation to which organisations receive grants?

Fully  Partly  No

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21. If you were unsuccessful in obtaining BEST funding, was an explanation provided to you?

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**Availability of volunteers in the future.**

22. Does your organisation have any problems finding and/or training suitable volunteers to do the work of pension assistance, advocacy or administrative support? If so, what are the problems that your organisation is facing in this regard?

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23. Even if you do not have any problems finding suitable volunteers to provide pensions assistance and advocacy at the moment, what kind of problems (if any) do you foresee in the future?

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24. What are the solutions that you see to these problems (if you see any)?

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Thank you for your assistance. Your views are vital for the complete evaluation of the program and we appreciate your willingness and cooperation.

*Ross Gurney and Max Kau*  
*Evaluators*  
(02) 6282 5997 or (03) 5463 2160

Please return this completed survey in the addressed postage-paid envelope provided by **5 June 2002**

## Attachment B: BEST Managers' Survey

### Evaluation of the Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) Program.

#### SURVEY FOR BEST MANAGERS

We would like to receive the completed surveys no later than **10 June 2002** so that processing and analysis can be completed according to the evaluation timetable. Your assistance will be very much appreciated.

This survey is intended for BEST managers within the Department.

Although we have already met with and talked to BEST managers in each of the States, we would find it helpful if the following survey were to be completed by those involved in the management of the BEST program.

There will be no problem should you wish to include other work colleagues in completing the survey. We simply want to gather a comprehensive set of answers from all of the Departmental officers who are most involved with the management of the BEST program.

A similar survey has gone out to ESO's that have applied for BEST funding (both successful and unsuccessful) – but there are some questions whose answers we need from Departmental personnel for the evaluation.

The survey is aimed at obtaining information about a range of issues to do with the Program, such as whether:

- the program is achieving its aim;
- it is doing this as efficiently as possible;
- it is doing so as effectively as possible;
- the quality of claims being received by DVA at the primary determining level is improving;
- the rate of appeals to the Veterans' Review Board (VRB) is reducing;
- the electronic lodgement of appeals is being promoted;
- the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants is being promoted.

It is also seeking to obtain information and suggestions about how to improve the impact of the BEST funding program.

Further, it is seeking information about the future role of BEST and strategies to ensure that veterans and their families continue to receive a

high level of support in making claims for pension assistance.

We ask you to keep in mind the context of the BEST funding program which is the legislation that enables support to be given to veterans and their dependents, and the processes by which veterans and their dependents may make a claim to receive a pension or to increase the amount of pension that they receive. The Department has recognised the value in having pension/welfare officers, case officers and advocates available to assist veterans and their dependents in making a primary claim or appealing the decisions that are made by departmental assessors.

Accordingly the BEST Program was established *to provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers.* (Best Program Guidelines, 1.2)

**IF AT ANY STAGE YOU RUN OUT OF SPACE, PLEASE ATTACH AN EXTRA PAGE WITH THE QUESTION NUMBER CLEARLY IDENTIFIED.**

**Please complete the following.**

State Office:

Your name and contact number *(in case we need to clarify any of the answers you provide)*:

Name  phone or mobile

Was this survey completed as a joint response from all staff involved?  or  
Your own personal response?

**Program aim**

1. Whether the aim of the BEST program is being achieved or not, could be answered in many specific ways, but for a start, and in general terms, would you say (from your involvement in activities that are to do with BEST funding support) that BEST's aim is being achieved:

*[please tick ONE box]*

- to an outstanding degree
- to a very high degree
- to a high degree
- to a poor degree
- to a very poor degree
- to an outstandingly poor degree

2. From your experience, is the BEST program

- Better than CAGS <sup>1</sup>
- About the same as CAGS <sup>2</sup>
- Not as good as CAGS <sup>3</sup>
- Filling a different role entirely <sup>4</sup>

3. If you ticked either box 3 or 4 above, could you please explain:

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4. Are any aspects of the work done by ESO's to assist Veterans or their families to lodge quality claims and make relevant appeals not being covered by either TIP or BEST, but should from your experience be covered?

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**Objectives**

One of the objectives of the BEST program is to “improve the quality of claims received at the primary determining level and assist ESO’s in achieving this objective” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

From talking to ESO representatives in focus groups in each state, and to compensation assessment officers in the regional offices of DVA, we have come to the conclusion that the quality of primary claims has to do with a number of issues, such as:

- whether the claim forms (veteran or widow etc) has been fully and accurately completed;
- whether the person for whom the claim is being made is entitled to make the claim;
- whether statements of principle have been consulted to ensure appropriateness of medical conditions covered;
- whether the claim is legitimate and not just an ambit claim;
- whether supporting documentation has been adequately researched and presented *bona fide* medical certificates etc.

5. Is it your perception that ESO’s that have received BEST funding/and or TIP training, are definitely able to do a better job as a result in helping veterans to submit claims?

- YES
- NO
- CAN’T REALLY BE POSITIVE ONE WAY OR THE OTHER

6. If you have noticed differences in the organisations that have received funding, and that could be attributed to the funding that has been received, what are those differences?

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7. Would you consider that those ESO’s that have not received BEST funding were having greater difficulty because they have not received funding? In what way?

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8. In relation to those ESO’s or support centres that you are familiar with, and that did not receive a BEST funding grant, would you consider that (assuming there was enough money for them to receive a grant) the quality of primary claims being submitted with the help of ESO’s or support centres would improve as a result of receiving BEST funding? In what way?

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9. What do you consider to be the key to the primary claims (process and content) being better?

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A second objective of the BEST program is to “reduce the rate of appeals to the Veterans’ Review Board (VRB)” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

10. In your opinion and from your association with ESO’s, would you say that since BEST was introduced there has been a reduction in the rate of appeals, at least from veterans associated with the funded organisations? i.e. has BEST had an impact on the rate of appeals?

YES  NO  CAN’T TELL

11. What do you consider to be the key to a reduction in the number of appeals?

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VRB? .....  
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AAT? .....  
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The third objective of the BEST program is to “Promote the use of electronic lodgement of claims” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

It is acknowledged that electronic lodgement of claims has not occurred. It would be useful, however to have your views on the following two questions:

12. How do you think electronic lodgement, if introduced, would benefit (a) veterans and their dependents,

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(b) ESO's and support centres?

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The final objective of the BEST program is to “Promote the provision of welfare services to veterans and their dependants” (Guidelines 1.2.b.)

13. Given that the range of welfare work that is undertaken by ESO's and support centres is almost unlimited, are there in your experience particular aspects of welfare work that might be supported in relation to the aims of the BEST program? If so, what are they?

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## **Funding Guidelines**

### **Eligibility**

The BEST Program Guidelines make it clear that to be eligible for funding, organisations must be either a *bona fide* ESO or an ESO support centre. Joint applications have been made in several parts of Australia by pension officers or ESO's that are working together. The Department has encouraged this cooperative approach because pension officers and advocates can benefit from each other's experience and knowledge when working together (resulting in better quality claims), and also because efficiencies can be gained from economies of scale.

Discussion in the focus groups suggested that there is an emerging interest being shown by ESO's in working together – particularly in some states.

14. From the ESO's that you work with, what are the significant gains being achieved through joint pension assistance?

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15. Do you see any disadvantages (for veterans and their dependants) in joint pension assistance of the kind being supported financially by the BEST Funding Program?

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16. What other examples of good practice have you observed in the ESO and support centre activities that come within the scope of the BEST funding program?

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**Funding purposes.**

As the guidelines indicate (Paragraph 3.1.e) the BEST program will provide grants for

- 1. full time or part time paid pension/welfare practitioners
- 2. full time or part time paid administrative support staff
- 3. leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences (has included other software and hardware, eg modems, Internet access etc)
- 4. consumables, running costs and other purposes relating to the lodgement of claims and appeals (eg travel and office equipment – has included audio-visual equipment)

17. Which of these from your observation, is the best use of the funding in terms of effectiveness and efficiency? (Please rank order from 1 = best to 5 = least)

- full time or part time paid pension/welfare practitioners
- full time or part time paid administrative support staff
- leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences
- consumables etc., as defined above
- it depends on the organisation rather than on what is funded

18. Do you think that there are other uses for which BEST funding should be available? If so, please describe these uses below.

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**Remote ESO operations**

19. Mention was made in some of the focus groups, that ESO's operating in more geographically scattered areas do not benefit so much from the BEST program. Do you agree? In what way? What could be done to overcome these problems?

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**Agreement with Department for the use of the funding**

20. A comprehensive Agreement is drawn up between, and signed by, the Department and funding recipients. Do you encounter any problems with managing this agreement (content, style or monitoring?)

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**Funding arrangement**

21. Are there issues to do with the funding arrangements (payment process, bookkeeping etc) that you believe need to be addressed? If so how do you think they should be addressed?

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**Reporting**

The Department, as funding authority, has a requirement to monitor and report to Parliament on the spending of the BEST money. Obtaining information from the funding recipients is an important part of this monitoring and reporting function.

22. What problems, if any, do you have with the reporting process as it currently operates?

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23. Is the information that is obtained through this reporting, useful in determining the performance of the grant recipients or the program as a whole?

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Is there information that you consider would be more useful – if so, what information?

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**Equipment issues (Consumables are dealt with in the next question)**

Funding has been provided, where requested and where deemed appropriate, for a range of support equipment and services, such as desktop/laptop computers, monitors, printers, copiers, modems; installation and maintenance; training; Internet access and help desk support. Many comments have been made in focus groups on almost every aspect of this provision.

24. Finding an effective and workable solution to these problems may not be easy. What are your suggestions for making this part of BEST assistance more effective and more efficient (including cost-efficient)?

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**Consumables issues**

Consumables have not been a major expense item in the funding claims, though this component in the Guidelines does include travel.

25. Are there any other issues with consumables that are a key to the BEST program fulfilling its aim and objectives?

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**Feedback**

Feedback is generally regarded as pivotal in managing and improving performance. We understand that some feedback is provided from claims assessment, though some ESO's have declared that it is not.

26. Is this feedback, as far as you know, regular and beneficial to the ESO's? Does it have an impact on the ESO's and support centres? If the feedback were to have a better impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the BEST program, how would it be different?

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**The Future**

There are changes occurring in the community as time passes. For example, there is some evidence that not as many people are willing to work as volunteers as was once the case. The population is aging and the veteran population (from which ESO's draw most of their volunteers) is also aging. The time may come when either ESO's do not have enough volunteers or the volunteers that they do have are not so heavily drawn from the veteran population. Or indeed, the governing legislation may become so extensive and complex that aging volunteers can not cope with it. We are interested in knowing about the implications that this might have on the task of helping veterans (and particularly whether the ESO's themselves are taking constructive steps to deal with the possibilities).

27. Are you aware of ESO's having problems finding and/or training suitable volunteers to do the work of pension assistance, advocacy or administrative support? What are the problems that they are facing in this regard?

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28. Even if you do not see this as a problem at the moment, do you foresee any problems in the future?

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29. What are the solutions that you see to these problems (if you see any)?

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**The veteran community**

We have been told in focus groups and by others that there are unknown numbers of veterans and dependants in the community, and that many of these are still coming to know about their entitlements. The BEST program exists to help these people, whenever they decide that they need assistance, to make a primary claim.

30. What, if anything, is being done to try and reach these people and encourage them to seek assistance in relation to their war-related health and well-being needs?

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**Thank you for your assistance.** Your views are vital for the complete evaluation of the program and we appreciate your willingness and cooperation.

Ross Gurney and Max Kau

Evaluators

(02) 6282 5997 or (03) 5463 2160

**Please return this completed survey in the addressed postage paid envelope provided by 12 June 2002**

## Attachment C: Claims Assessors' Survey

Evaluation of the  
Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) Program.

### SURVEY FOR CLAIMS ASSESSOR

We would like to receive the completed surveys no later than **10 June 2002** so that processing and analysis can be completed according to the evaluation timetable. Your assistance will be very much appreciated.

This survey is intended for claims assessors within the Department. It is to assist in the evaluation of the BEST program.

Your co-operation in completing it is very much appreciated.

We really only need one completed survey from your office – though if you have divergent opinions among your colleagues, we would appreciate knowing about those views.

The survey is aimed at obtaining information about a range of issues to do with the BEST Program, such as whether:

- the program is achieving its aim;
- it is doing this as efficiently as possible;
- it is doing so as effectively as possible;
- the quality of claims being received by DVA at the primary determining level is improving;

The survey is a key part of an evaluation of the Building Excellence in Support and Training (BEST) Program because one of the key objectives of the Program has to do with the quality of claims at the primary determining level. You and your colleague's experience and opinions about the quality of claims are vital to the evaluation.

It is also seeking to obtain information and suggestions about how to improve the impact of the BEST funding program.

Further, it is seeking information about the future role of BEST and strategies to ensure that veterans and their families continue to

receive a high level of support in making claims for pension assistance.

We ask you to keep in mind the context of the BEST funding program which is the legislation that enables support to be given to veterans and their dependents, and the processes by which veterans and their dependents may make a claim to receive a pension or to increase the amount of pension that they receive.

The Department has recognised the value in having pension/welfare officers, case officers and advocates available to assist veterans and their dependents in making a primary claim or appealing the decisions that are made by departmental assessors.

Accordingly the BEST Program was established *to provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pension and welfare work to assist veterans and widows/widowers.*

(Best Program Guidelines, 1.2)

**Please complete the following.**

State Office:

Your name and contact number *(in case we need to clarify any of the answers you provide):*

Name  phone or mobile

Was this survey completed as a joint response from all staff involved?  or  
Your own personal response?

**Program issues**

**Aim**

The BEST program was introduced with the aim of helping ESO practitioners to assist veterans and widows/widowers , especially in the areas of pension and welfare work.

1. We appreciate that you may not have much direct contact with either ESO's or veterans and their dependants. But would you say (from your involvement in activities that are to do with BEST funding support) that BEST's aim is being achieved:

*[please tick ONE box]*

- to an outstanding degree
- to a very high degree
- to a high degree
- to a poor degree
- to a very poor degree
- to an outstandingly poor degree

2. From your experience and observation, is the BEST program:

- Better than CAGS (a program in operation before BEST)  <sup>1</sup>
- About the same as CAGS  <sup>2</sup>
- Not as good as CAGS  <sup>3</sup>
- Filling a different role entirely, can't compare them  <sup>4</sup>
- Had no experience of CAGS  <sup>5</sup>

3. If you ticked box 3 above, could you please explain why it is not as good:

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**Objectives**

While at this stage it is not easy to demonstrate that claims submitted with the assistance of funded ESO's are unequivocally (or even in general) better than those submitted without the

assistance of a funded ESO, what is general perception of those who are involved in claims assessment?

4. Is it your perception that claims coming through ESO's that have received BEST funding are on the whole of better quality than claims coming through ESO's without BEST funding or from veterans who did not get any ESO assistance?

Fully  Partly  No

5. Are you generally aware of which claims have been submitted with ESO support? If you are able to determine which have and which haven't, is it your opinion that claims submitted with ESO support are:

- generally of much better quality <sup>1</sup>
- generally of better quality <sup>2</sup>
- generally no different in quality <sup>3</sup>
- poorer in some respects only <sup>4</sup>
- generally of poorer quality <sup>5</sup>

If you ticked the fourth box above, would you please explain in what respect(s) they tend to be better, and in what ways they are poorer or no different?

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If you ticked box 1 or 2 above, please explain below in what ways claims are of better quality. If you ticked box 4 or 5 please explain below in what ways claims are poorer in quality.

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6. Are you aware of which ESO's have received BEST funding? If so, would you provide an opinion about whether in general the claims that have come through those organisations are of a better quality than those coming from organisations that have not been funded.

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7. In what ways do you consider that the quality of primary claims being submitted with the help of ESO's are of better quality (or would have improved as a result of receiving BEST funding)?

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BEST funding has been for a range of things:

- full time or part time paid pension/welfare practitioners
- full time or part time paid administrative support staff
- leased computers and electronic form lodgement licences (has included other software and hardware, eg modems, Internet access etc)
- consumables, running costs and other purposes relating to the lodgement of claims and appeals (eg travel and office equipment – has included audio-visual equipment)

8. As assessors, which of these do you perceive to be having a worthwhile impact on the quality of claims being submitted?

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From talking to ESO representatives in focus groups in each state, and to some compensation assessment officers in the regional offices of DVA, we have come to the conclusion that the quality of primary claims has to do with a number of issues, such as:

- whether the claim form (X6732-P) has been fully and accurately completed;
- whether the person for whom the claim is being made is entitled to make the claim;
- whether statements of principle have been consulted to ensure appropriateness of medical conditions covered;
- whether the claim is legitimate and not just an ambit claim;
- whether supporting documentation has been adequately researched and presented (*bona fide* medical certificates etc.)

9. Are there other issues which you see as key to the expeditious assessment of claims? If so please list them here:

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10. Which of the identified items above plus the ones you may have added display the biggest need for improvement in the claims that you are processing?

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11. In what way do you feel that the targeting of BEST funds might be reinforced or extended to have a more effective impact on these dimensions of quality?

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**Feedback**

Feedback is generally regarded as pivotal in managing and improving performance. We understand that some feedback is provided from claims assessment, though some ESO's have declared that it is not.

12. What kind of feedback does your office provide to ESO's and support centres about the quality needs of claims?

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13. In your experience, is this feedback having any effect on the quality of claims that you are receiving?

Yes  No  Can't tell

The ESO's and support centres rely primarily on volunteers as pensions and welfare officers. Most of these are veterans themselves, and their personal war service is a valued aspect of their involvement in pensions and welfare work.

14. The reliance on volunteers may, however, have some drawbacks as far as the quality of claims and appeals is concerned. Do you consider that the use of volunteers is a significant contributory factor in claims failing to be of an appropriate quality?

Yes  No  Only in some cases

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Thank you for your assistance. Your views are vital for the complete evaluation of the program and we appreciate your willingness and cooperation.

Ross Gurney and Max Kau  
Evaluators  
(02) 6282 5997 or (03) 5463 2160

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