

**SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO RECRUITMENT & RETENTION
OF DEFENCE PERSONNEL**

SUBMISSION

Submission No: 57

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NCGSF National Consultative Group of Service Families

SUBMISSION TO

SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE and TRADE

REFERENCES and LEGISLATION COMMITTEE



1. Background:

The National Consultative Group of Service Families (NCGSF) was formed in 1987 to work with the Minister and Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) in addressing areas concerning Australian Defence families. The NCGSF is funded by Defence but operated by volunteer Defence spouses across Australia. The NCGSF comprises national, regional and local levels and we 'live and breathe' Defence life on a daily basis.

The NCGSF has prepared this submission on behalf of Australian Defence Force (ADF) families for the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References and Legislation Committee with regard to the recruitment and retention of ADF personnel. The NCGSF has specifically addressed the retention issues facing Defence members with dependents (MWD).

The two areas raised in the following introduction lead the NCGSF to consider the implied impact on MWD. This submission details the individual issues that were raised by families. The recommendations that follow include suggestions where increased budgets and resources can resolve these areas of concern.

2. Introduction: Today's ADF:

1. The ADF is currently experiencing alarmingly high rates of separation. The rate of separation is currently 13.4% average over the three services and appears to be deteriorating. The '10 year' average for Navy, Army and Airforce is 10.72%, 11.66% and 8.83% respectively. Current wastage rates for these services, in order, are 13.57%, 13.17% and 10.9%.

Manning levels are critical and each service is experiencing personnel shortages in all major strategic areas. This is causing enormous pressures on remaining personnel and their families. Overworked and disillusioned, remaining personnel are more frequently considering employment options outside the ADF and the situation worsens.

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Clearly the voluntary discharge of any Defence member is a financial loss to the ADF. However the voluntary discharge of older, more experienced ADF members is a catastrophic return on the ADF's investment in those individuals. The training, education and culture invested in these members is lost and extremely slow to replace given today's recruitment rates.

The older, highly trained and experienced personnel are often members with families. The families of these members have provided the NCGSF with details of the issues concerning them in the areas of career management and conditions of service. These issues are discussed below.

2. Australia's geographical position indicates a greater need for our ADF members to be deployed in peace time activities. The recent deployments to Timor, Bougainville, Somalia and Cambodia place enormous pressures on all members but particularly members with families. Also the 'normal' deployments by Navy tend to be for increasing periods of time due to our geographical isolation and increasing operational requirements.

Support provided to families during deployments is not only essential for the coping strategies of the family but also impacts on the morale of the member. Many members voluntarily leave the Defence Force if they feel their families are not being adequately looked after at home. Further, without the necessary support, families will place pressure on the member to discharge from the ADF.

Again, ADF members have been the recipients of substantial ADF investment and over half have dependants. These members have spouses, children and family responsibilities that need to be addressed at every level of their careers. Spouse employment and children's education continue to be in the top 3 reasons given by members upon voluntary discharge.

The ADF has achieved a great deal over past years in addressing issues faced by Service families. However there is still much room for improvement. The areas identified by families regarding support during and between deployments are discussed below.

3. Issues that impact on the retention of Members with Families:

a) Career Management within the ADF:

The NCGSF has heard increasingly from members who are dissatisfied with the management of their careers within the ADF. Members feel that the individuality of their careers is overlooked when pressured career managers are looking to meet operational requirements and fill placements.

Defence personnel who are highly trained and often specialists in their areas, are not immune to the mismanagement of their careers. More experienced Defence personnel have often served many years and have actively pursued long term careers within the ADF. The poor management of their careers or lack of promotional prospects will cause them to reconsider their employment options.

It appears to many members that the traditional ADF promotion procedures are outdated in an increasingly competitive and transparent workplace. Members are hesitant to wait 4-5 years for their next promotion simply due to mandatory time-served requirements in some ranks.

Members have acknowledged the pressures on, and lack of training for, ADF career managers. All large companies have highly trained Human Resource managers but the ADF often places members 'out of branch' in posting or career management positions. This approach to man-management is costing the ADF in terms of real people.

b) Erosion of Conditions of Service;

There is an increasing feeling amongst members and families that their hard-won conditions of service are being eroded. I am confident that this issue will be addressed in other submissions presented to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee. Subsequently, this issue will only be touched on in the NCGSF submission.

There have been specific allowances and conditions of service that have been altered in recent years that have lead members to feel that their general conditions of service are eroding. Examples include the changes to Remote Locality Leave Travel (RLLT), the reporting of 'service conditions' as a fringe benefit (ie reunion travel) and the abolishment of Isolated Establishment Allowance (IEA).

Members and families feel that certain allowances and conditions are granted as tangible appreciation of an extraordinary lifestyle. Once this condition is altered or reduced, the morale of members plummets. Members and families see no real benefit in maintaining impossible lifestyles when there is no financial or tangible show of appreciation by the ADF.

With reduced financial benefits or conditions, members and families will avoid some postings or separate from the ADF altogether.

c) Support to families during deployments:

After the deployment to East Timor in 1999, the NCGSF was invited by CDF to report on the support provided to families during this period. The NCGSF's report highlighted the

inconsistencies in the support provided to families during the East Timor operations. Some of the areas specifically addressed by the NCGSF were;

- i) The need for consistency in the support provided by individual units and ships to families at home
- ii) The necessity of correct Next Of Kin information provided by members
- iii) The need for a more heavily resourced Defence Community Organisation during major military operations.

The need for comprehensive support for ADF families during major military operations and 'normal' deployments cannot be overestimated. Families undergo enormous stresses during periods of separation and the stress increases exponentially during dangerous military operations.

Many suggestions can be made as to how this support network can be improved and strengthened. However, it is not the intent of this submission to address this point.

Support to families during all deployments is vital. However, Timor proved that whilst many support networks can be 'kicked into action', the end results are not always consistent or adequate.

The issue of family support during deployments **MUST** be addressed. Increasing peace-time activity and deployments will place more pressure on Defence families. If the support networks are not effective in alleviating this pressure, people will leave.

d) Support to families between deployments (DCO):

The pressures on families between deployments come in a different form. Frequent removals, assimilating into new communities, living in remote areas, leaving family and friends and relocating school age children are all part of daily life for Defence members and families.

The Defence Community Organisation (DCO) was established in 1997 to address these pressures. The DCO provides psychologists, social workers, family liaison officers (FLO's), regional education liaison officers (REDLO's) and a facility for funding Defence family activities.

Defence families need more from the DCO than currently provided. For example ADF families have long requested increased FLO and REDLO hours during peak removal periods. The DCO goal to greet Defence families as they move into the gaining locality is hampered by poor communication from Defence and limited DCO resources.

DCO needs more resources to provide the services needed by ADF members and families. The needs of families could be more adequately addressed by DCO if that organisation had access to greater funding.

e) Spouse employment:

As stated previously, spouse employment continues to be a major factor in a members decision to separate from the ADF. The ADF has a 'Spouse Employment Programme' administered by the DCO.

However the individual needs of Defence spouses in regards to their current and future employment, are not met through this generically administered scheme.

Increasingly, Defence spouses are tertiary educated and professionally employed. Spouses often have differing needs when it comes to assistance in locating employment in the gaining locality, preparation of resumes, child care whilst attending interviews or coordinating long term child care.

Whilst the current levels of funding for the 'Spouse Employment Programme' appear adequate, the administration of this scheme should be more individually based which caters for the diverse needs of a multi-skilled group of people.

f) Posting and relocating:

Many members and families are suffering from the lifestyle insecurity associated with posting turbulence. CDF's Directives regarding the minimisation of disruption to school age children in 'important' school years and back-to-back postings are not occurring.

Members and families generally accept that operational capability requirements often conflict with these directives but posting stability **MUST** be achieved to provide some sort of security and stability to families.

Many proposals have been floated throughout Defence recently regarding this issue. However achieved, posting stability and back-to-back postings must become an achievable objective for the future ADF to retain members with families.

g) Children's Education:

Moving school aged children continues to be a major stressor to Defence families. The problems caused by the lack of a national school starting age and curriculum places considerable stress on members and families when moving interstate. Defence parents are

often placed in the position of choosing to school their children with their social peers (same age) or academic peers (same grade).

Further the allowance given to families to cover costs when moving children (uniforms, books etc) is inadequate.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS :

1. Career Management- The ADF needs to adequately train career managers in human resource management. More career projection should be applied to cater to the needs of individuals. Mandatory time-served for promotion should be considered seriously as an impediment to educated and ambitious personnel staying with the ADF.
2. Erosion of conditions of service- The ADF needs to recognise that conditions of service are seen as a tangible recognition of the extraordinary requirements of Service life. Reducing or altering these conditions has an immediate impact on members' motivation to live with these extraordinary lifestyle requirements. Conditions of service must be preserved.
3. Support to families during and between deployments- The DCO needs to be considered by the ADF as a real driver behind members' and families' capabilities to cope with Service life. DCO's funding and level of resources must be increased to meet the increasing demands on members and families.
4. Spouse employment- the existing Spouse Employment Programme within the DCO must be administered in a less generic manner. There should be scope to meet the more individualised needs of Defence spouses in regard to their mobile employment.
5. Postings and relocation- More emphasis must be placed on meeting CDF's Directives regarding minimising disruption to school age children and the promotion of back-to-back postings. Without stability of posting and security of tenure, members and families are increasingly seeking options outside ADF.
6. Allowances for moving children between schools to cover costs such as uniforms, books and tuition need to be increased.

5. SUMMARY:

The ADF has changed dramatically over recent years. There have been commendable moves by Government and Senior ADF to address morale and other intangible factors in the employment of over 50 000 people.

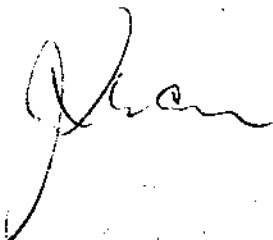
However the future of the ADF is that of increasing pressures on its personnel. Increased regional activity and historically high rates of separation are cause for great concern for the ADF.

Through the highly popular Community Consultation process for Defence Review 2000, there has been much public debate on the physical capabilities of the ADF. Our 'Strike Force', land strategic defences and naval readiness are all highly important to the operational capabilities of our island continent.

However, without highly trained and experienced personnel to fly planes, man tanks and crew ships; the operational capabilities are seriously diminished.

These highly trained personnel come at a cost; the cost of recruiting, training and retention. They also come with families. If the members and families needs are not addressed, retention rates will continue to slide and the future of the ADF in 2000 and beyond seems precarious.

On behalf of the NCGSF and Australian Defence families, I would like to thank the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for the opportunity to submit the views of ADF families.



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8 May 2001