

**OPENING STATEMENT**  
**SECRETARY LIZ COSSON AM, CSC**  
**ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES 2019–20**  
**FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE LEGISLATION**  
**COMMITTEE**  
**4 MARCH 2020**  
**MAIN COMMITTEE ROOM, PARLIAMENT HOUSE**  
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Thank you Chair. I would like to update the Committee on significant announcements and developments since our appearance last October.

**National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention**

On 5 February 2020 the Australian Government announced a comprehensive package in response to the complex issue of suicide in our military and veteran community.

There will be a new independent and permanent public accountability body – the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention – who will inquire into all suspected veteran and Australian Defence Force suicides and identify associated risk factors.

The National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention will have similar but enduring powers to a Royal Commission to compel the production of evidence and summon witnesses, and make findings and recommendations to Government. The National Commissioner will provide an Annual Report to Parliament.

The National Commissioner will also oversee a comprehensive review and analysis of the more than 400 suicide deaths in the Defence and Veteran communities since 2001. This review will have a set timeframe and Terms of Reference. An Interim Report will be delivered to Government within 12 months, and a Final Report at 18 months.

I also offer a note of caution when we discuss the matter of suicide. Evidence from years of study informs us that widespread coverage, and language, can have the opposite effect on what we all want, which is – to reduce the number of suicides. We must try to reassure and retain hope for those who are experiencing mental health or broader life challenges.

### **Veteran Family Advocate**

A Veteran Family Advocate will be appointed to directly engage with the families of veterans and place their perspectives at the heart of veteran policy and decision-making.

The Veteran Family Advocate will sit on the Repatriation and Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commissions within the Veterans' Affairs portfolio and will work closely with the National Commissioner and the Prime Minister's National Suicide Prevention Adviser.

A selection process to appoint the Veteran Family Advocate will commence shortly.

### **Productivity Commission's Final Report**

The Productivity Commission's final report of its inquiry into compensation and rehabilitation for veterans proposed major reforms to the veteran support system.

The proposed reforms encompass the whole system, not just DVA and Defence, but also other government agencies, ex-service organisations, and service providers with serving and ex-serving members and their families at the centre. This is a substantial report looking at a complex system.

The Government is in the process of finalising its response to the Productivity Commission and its recommendations and the Department is working with other agencies to assist the Government to formulate this response.

### **Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and National Action Plan**

Veteran mental health and wellbeing remains a priority and since June 2019, we have been working with a range of stakeholders, including experts, the veteran community and across government, including state and territory agencies, to reshape the Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and develop a National Action Plan to improve veterans' mental health and wellbeing and to prevent suicide.

The Strategy will be released shortly.

### **Psychiatric Assistance Dogs**

DVA's Psychiatric Assistance Dog Program for veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is underway and progressing well.

So far, 51 veterans have been provisionally approved, subject to suitability assessment by the dog supplier and 36 dogs are in training, with more to come. Another group of up to 20 dogs are currently undertaking training as part of a four-year trial commissioned by DVA at La Trobe University. The trial, involving 20 veterans, commenced in mid-2018 and will be used to help evaluate and improve the DVA program.

### **Veteran Centric Reform – Putting Veterans and their Families First**

As the Committee is aware, we are continuing our Veteran Centric Reform (VCR) program. Over 142,000 veterans have registered using our online channel MyService and over 86,000 claims have been lodged. MyService allows veterans and their families to lodge claims faster and more easily – and let us know about their change in circumstances.

Over 23,000 new DVA clients have been proactively contacted as a result of our data sharing activities with Defence, and more than 11,000 veterans have been connected to earlier access to medical treatment while their claims are being processed.

We continue to modernise and simplify DVA's telephone system to make it easier for veterans and their families to contact us. We are moving to a single enquiry phone line (1800 VETERAN) for most calls and a voice recognition system to make it easier for our clients to connect to the right people. To date we have removed a total of 157 unnecessary phone numbers and have achieved more than a 90% accuracy rate with voice recognition.

Our new DVA website was launched last night (Tuesday 3 March). The new site focuses on information that is simple to find, easy to understand and clearer for the veteran community. The new site includes a new virtual assistant Pat who can answer simple questions to help get to information in a different way.

### **Veterans' Recognition Package (VRP)**

The Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant has now been enacted in legislation. To date over 83,000 people have applied for the Veterans' Recognition Program. Around 20% of these applicants are from clients who are new to DVA.

### **Veteran Wellbeing Centres**

As part of the Department's broader transformation program, DVA is shifting away from an illness model to a wellbeing model that allows veterans to achieve greater independence for themselves and their families.

In line with this model, the Government has committed to investing \$30 million for a national network of six Veterans' Wellbeing Centres in Townsville, Darwin, Perth, Adelaide, Wodonga and Nowra.

It is expected that the Centres will connect veterans and their families into a range of core services that will include support for transition, employment, housing, and physical and mental health. Work to establish the Centres is progressing well.

### **Claims Processing**

As a result of making it easier for veterans and families to connect with us, we are currently experiencing a significant increase in our claim numbers, in part due to the success of our transformation, we have undergone in recent years. To give a sense of the size of this increase, in 2018-19 we received 41,839 more claims than we did the year before; that is an 83% increase across all claim types. This trend is also continuing this year.

While simplifying the claiming process for veterans and their families has been a positive outcome, the flip side of this is that the sheer volume of this increase in claims has temporarily outstripped our capacity to process them as quickly as we would like, and it will likely take us a little while to 'catch back up'. This is despite an increase of around 40% in claims processing efficiency in 2018-19.

In the meantime we're working on a number of things to address this matter, including (but not limited to) making claim processing more efficient and easier for staff. We're also focussing on making sure that where possible we are identifying veterans who may be at risk and prioritising their claims accordingly. This is all on top of the assistance which veterans can already access prior to their claim being finalised, including Non-Liability Health Care

(NLHC), Provisional Access to Medical Treatment (PAMT), and the Veteran Payment.

This is something which we will be working through for some time, with the positive outcome of providing many more veterans and their families with access to services, support, and entitlements to assist them to improve their wellbeing and live fulfilling lives.

**Recent and upcoming commemorative events**

On Tuesday 18 February, approximately 350 people attended the service to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation HAMMERSLEY from the Vietnam War.

This was closely followed by a service to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation TAMAR, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda, on Saturday 22 February. This service was attended by over 700 people, with a commemorative address delivered by the Governor General.

The feedback received from attendees of both events has been overwhelmingly positive.

In addition to planning for Anzac Day services we are also preparing to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Pacific.

Thank you Chair.

ENDS