

OPENING STATEMENT
SECRETARY LIZ COSSON AM, CSC
ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES 2020-21
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE LEGISLATION
COMMITTEE
24 MARCH 2021
MAIN COMMITTEE ROOM, PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Thank you Chair.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all staff of the Department for their efforts maintaining services to veterans and families, continuing with our transformation program, adapting to new ways of working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to the recent floods impacting NSW residents.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of our ex-service organisations and particularly the advocate community, for their ongoing patience during this challenging time and their commitment to our veteran community.

Claims Processing

As I mentioned at the October hearing, we are experiencing an unprecedented increase in claims received and on hand, largely because Veteran Centric Reform and a greater emphasis on outreach has made it easier for more veterans and families to connect with us. Over the past years, veteran numbers have increased and we have seen a threefold increase in claims received. We are also seeing an increase in the complexity of veteran claims.

Although we have made incredible productivity gains, particularly during COVID, and we have increased the number of claims we have finalised by 13%, keeping up with the demand and processing claims as quickly as we would like remains a challenge. I acknowledge that some are waiting for long periods for their claims to be finalised and we are implementing a range of strategies and prioritising claims for at risk veterans.

I also want to respond to the recent reporting regarding the contracted workforce and acknowledge that current 42% is not sustainable but DVA will always have a blended workforce and it is important to acknowledge the work of all DVA staff, APS and contractors for the work they do supporting the veteran community.

I would also like to offer another fact on our latest progress on gender balance and representation on boards. Last quarter to 31 December 2020, 58.8% of reportable positions on boards were held by women and 41.2% were held by men. Within DVA's workforce, 66% of staff are female and 34% are males.

Suicide and Mental Health

We remain committed to reducing the rate of suicide in the veteran community and the Department continues to support the important work of the interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention, Dr Bernadette Boss, including through the independent review of past Defence and veteran suicides. We also continue to work to find ways to support veterans and their families to build and sustain wellbeing to support good mental health, recovery, and reducing veteran suicide as part of the WOG approach towards zero suicides

Any veteran or family member who is troubled by the recent conversations around suicide I encourage them to call Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling on 1800 011 046 or the Department on 1800 VETERAN (1800 838 372)

Chair, I ask that this statement and the update of Facts and Figures from our appearance at Budget Estimates Facts be tabled.

Facts & Figures (at 24 March 2021)**COVID-19 (at 4 Mar 2021)**

Total amount of COVID-19 economic support payments to DVA clients	Over \$450 million
Number of DVA clients who received economic support payments	March 2020 – over 226,000 July 2020 – over 221,000 Dec 2020 – over 218,000 March 2021 – over 215,000
Number of DVA dependants who receive education support also received the temporary fortnightly Coronavirus Supplement	1,500 (from April 2020)
Number of DVA telehealth, medical and specialist health care services delivered from March to May 2020	144,000
Number of letters sent to vulnerable DVA veterans (April 2020)	70,000
Number of letters to GP's (April 2020)	18,500
Number of DVA aged care providers	2,500
Text messages sent to DVA clients	27,000 – April 2020 22,000 – December 2020 – January 2021
Number of letters sent to DVA clients about mental wellbeing during and after COVID-19	30,000
Number of letters to GP's about mental wellbeing during and after COVID-19 (July 2020)	15,500
Number of letters to pharmacists	9,000
Members of the veteran community reached through special e-news bulletins	150,000

“Safe Zone” anonymous counselling line call	224 - Mar 2021
Percentage of DVA staff that participated in remote work during the pandemic	Up to 90 percent
Percentage of DVA staff currently working remotely on any given day	44 percent (February 2021)

Budget 2020-21

Increase fees paid by DVA to mental health, social work and community nursing providers, fee simplification and fund psychiatric training places	\$94.3 million
Expand Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling	\$5.0 million
Expand eligibility of the Coordinated Veterans’ Care Program to certain White Card holders	\$2.4 million
Supplementary funding to support DVA’s resourcing	\$64.1 million
Additional support for Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Veterans,	\$25.9 million
Broaden the Prime Minister’s Veterans’ Employment Program	\$6.0 million
Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War.	\$1.1 million

Veteran Centric Reform (at 28 Feb 21)

Welcome emails sent from DVA to new enlisted ADF members	Over 21,200
New registrations to DVA from current-serving members processed through the Early Engagement Model	Over 29,700
Bases with DVA Veteran Support Officers	56
Number of veterans with a MyService account	Over 178,700
Number of claims lodged through MyService	Over 161,300

Users of the new DVA website per month	Average of over 200,000 users per month
Number of telephone lines consolidated	179 to 14
Veteran files digitised	Over 411,800 (83 million pages)

Respect and Recognition (at 6 February 2021)

Number of Veterans' Recognition Package applications	Over 111,000
Number of business providing offers (nationwide) to Veteran Card Holders	800
Registrations for WWII Commemorative Medallion	Over 6,200

Claims Processing (at 30 December 2020)

Covers the four contemporary streams: MRCA liability and permanent impairment; DRCA liability and permanent impairment; VEA Disability support; and VEA War Widow/ers and dependants.

Gross claims received	121,853
Increase in gross claims received from 2018-19 to 2019-20	16,535 (16 per cent)
Increase in gross claims received from 2017-18 to 2018-19	44,655 (73.6 per cent)
Increase in gross claims received from 2017-18 to 2019-20 (2 year total)	61,190 (101 per cent)
Conditions determined	95,667
Increase in conditions determined from 2018-19 to 2019-20	10,693 (12.6 per cent)
Increase in conditions determined from 2017-18 to 2018-19	26,750 (45.9 per cent)
Increase in conditions determined from 2017-18 to 2019-20 (2 year total)	37,443 (64.3 per cent)

Conditions accepted	67,938
Proportion of conditions accepted	70 per cent
Increase in conditions accepted from previous year	8,637 (14.56 per cent)
Claims remaining on hand at 30 June 2020	49,481
Increase in claims on hand from 30 June 2019	9,582 (24 per cent)
Percentage of claims decided within target timeframe	35 per cent