

SECRETARY

OPENING STATEMENT

SENATE ESTIMATES – FEBRUARY 2024

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I am pleased to inform the Committee that DVA continues to make progress to clear the claims backlog.

Of the 41,800 claims in the backlog originally identified in the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide's interim report, over 85 per cent (85.6 per cent) have now been completed.

As at 31 January, there are 3,697 claims awaiting allocation.

Of these claims, 549 are for initial liability; 18 for incapacity; and 3,130 for permanent impairment.

These figures reflect a substantial reduction since the last Estimates when I reported 16,723 unallocated claims: 4,743 initial liability claims, 69 incapacity claims, and 11,911 permanent impairment claims.

The initial liability and incapacity backlogs have been cleared and we are now allocating new IL and Incapacity claims for processing within two weeks of receiving them.

Currently, we are on track to have the permanent impairment backlog of unallocated claims cleared by the end of February.

This achievement will fulfil recommendation two of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide's Interim Report, ahead of the 31 March deadline this year.

While this is a great outcome, I fully acknowledge that it is only a first step.

On average, DVA receives around 3,500 new claims every two weeks.

This is our business-as-usual level of incoming new claims across Initial Liability, Permanent Impairment and Incapacity.

As we transition to a new working model, it is my expectation that new claims will be allocated to an officer for processing within two weeks.

We have already achieved this benchmark for new Initial Liability and Incapacity claims, and by the end of February the same will be true for Permanent Impairment.

Our aim is that no veteran's claim will sit unallocated for more than a fortnight, but will move swiftly from initial lodgement to active processing.

This goal has been achieved by changing our operating model and delivering on our promise to increase our claims processing workforce by 500 staff. As at 31 December 2023, we had over 1,100 FTE working across claims processing. This includes CSOs and delegates. This does not include management and administration staff. This is an increase of 569.4 FTE (up 104.6%) since 30 June 2022.

As we move forward, these changes will ensure the unacceptable backlog of the past is never repeated.

But as I said, clearing the backlog is only a first step.

There are still too many veterans who have been waiting for an outcome for their claims for far too long.

We will continue to make every effort to process claims as quickly as possible.

We are also taking steps to better inform veterans about what information they need to provide ahead of submitting a claim, so we can avoid delays.

As a department, we need to do our part to ensure claims are processed as quickly as possible to get veterans and their families the support they need.

While we have undertaken work to improve processing times through more claims support officers, increased training and improvements to MyService, there is still more to do.

To further reduce processing times we are employing and training more staff as delegates, and moving officers from working on the backlog to processing claims.

We are also streamlining over 200 medical forms to reduce the time taken filling in paper work. By the end of February, 73 forms will be consolidated into 30 resulting in an overall reduction of 156 pages to 69.

Processing time across most claim types has come down over the last 12 months.

Determinations are at record levels, being nearly 50% (48.9%) higher at 7,374 in January 2024, up from 4,952 in January 2023.

These figures highlight the department's commitment to increase the rate at which determinations are made, and get support to where it is needed most.

Across the whole department, we are seeking to improve service delivery for veterans.

Through Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling, veterans and their families have 24 hour mental health and wellbeing support available seven days a week.

On average, when a veteran calls Open Arms, a staff member in our Client Assist contact centre will have answered it in 11 seconds.

Over 98% of all calls are answered within 180 seconds.

This is an outcome that ensures that there is always someone on the other end of the line when a member of the veteran community is reaching out for help.

We have also allocated additional resources to the Veteran Access Network (VAN) and we've seen a marked improvement to call wait times.

Over the last 12 months there has been progressive improvement, with average wait times coming down from nearly seven and a half minutes in the six months to December 2022, to five minutes 12 seconds in the six months ending in December 2023.

Our target is to reduce wait times to under five minutes.

In November and December last year the VAN achieved this target for the first time since December 2022.

This result was achieved despite an increase in the number of calls the VAN received, up by 1,796 in the period for a total of nearly 200,000 calls for the year.

While we still have a way to go, these figures show that our efforts are having an impact and we are trending in the right direction.

DVA is also focused on implementing all the recommendations of the interim report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

We are focused on delivering business improvements to better support the veteran community, such as the standardisation of forms and improvements to MyService.

We are progressing the simplification and harmonisation of veterans legislation, modernising our IT systems and improving our modelling capabilities so we can better plan for the future.

In closing, I want to acknowledge and thank DVA's staff for their efforts in clearing the backlog and continuing efforts to determine claims.

I am only able to report on these achievements because of their dedication and commitment to serving those who have served our nation.

Thank you.