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Response to the Bill for an Act to establish a National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention

Soldier On supports the establishment of a National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (Commissioner). In doing so, we acknowledge the alarming statistics and devastating reality of suicide amongst current serving members and veterans of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Soldier On is intent that the creation of a Commissioner leads to improved outcomes on the ground; additionally, the Commissioner must focus on existing infrastructure and how best to enhance it. Our purpose is to enable veterans and their families to thrive. This goal has seen hundreds of lives saved and improved¹, and has provided Soldier On with incomparable experience. On this, we submit the following feedback and recommendations.

The Issue

Modern conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq saw the deaths of 42 Australian service members; a figure which has been far surpassed by instances of current and former ADF member suicide – 419 between 2001 and 2017. The rate of suicide of ADF ex-service men from 2002-2017 was 18% higher than the national male average². Further, there are veterans falling through the gaps of the various government agencies, as well as those who have died by some form of risk taking or misadventure who are not being included in these statistics. The real number of Defence and veteran suicides is undoubtedly higher³.

This problem is pervasive and now well recognised by individuals, organisations, and the government. The issue for the Commissioner will be determining how best to minimise risk factors and prevent further deaths by suicide from occurring. The Bill proposes a top-down approach to

¹ From an interview with Ivan Slavich: Veteran and CEO of Soldier On, 10/09/2020

² Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force Personnel: 2019 update
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/national-veteran-suicide-monitoring/contents/summary>

³ From interviews with: Prudence Slaughter – Soldier On Pathways Program Director, 23/09/2020

Kaye Adams – Veteran and Soldier On National Psychology Services Manager, 29/09/2020

Joe Losinno – Veteran and Clinical Psychologist, 29/09/2020





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suicide prevention; this has the potential to be problematic and will require the Commissioner to ensure policy is actioned by its findings which will see tangible improvements to the lives of the demographic in question. It is vital that the Commissioner be given a level of authority which ensures their recommendations for reform are seriously considered and implemented. For service members and veterans alike, there is no purpose in a reactionary commission if its findings are not employed to avoid subsequent deaths by suicide.

There are many existing strategies and organisations devoted to fostering mental health and wellbeing within and beyond the ADF, and which often work directly with service members and veterans in a more hands on capacity. These institutions employ both therapeutic and pastoral resources to curtail rates of mental illness and suicide amongst current and former members of the defence forces. Despite this, an obstacle still clearly exists in suicide prevention: we posit that it is currently a problem of scope and funding. The reality is that many veterans do not identify themselves as such and, consequently, they do not seek the support they are entitled to and may require. Further, organisations such as Soldier On do not have the funding to make as much difference as they are capable of. To be effective, the Commissioner must make recommendations to government which consider all the individuals at risk, as well as existing organisations and how they may be enabled to provide further support and services.

Existing Infrastructure

The Objects of the Act state that the Commissioner aims “to promote understanding of suicide risks for defence members and veterans and factors that can improve the wellbeing of defence members and veterans.” There are already well-established organisations operating with these principles and with knowledge of risk and wellbeing factors. The Commissioner should not be playing catch up, instead, they should find ways to increase the scope of these organisations.

Additionally, from the perspectives of veterans themselves, significant strides could be made if there were more cohesion instituted between the Department of Defence (DoD) and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA)⁴; allowing veterans to transition from one to the other without suffering a loss of identity. Soldier On urges the government not to reinvent the wheel in the

⁴ From an interview with Ben Farinazzo: Veteran, Invictus Games medalist, and Soldier On ambassador, 22/09/2020





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establishment of a Commissioner; existing infrastructure is and can be even more effective with increased attention in the right areas. With even a portion of the funding being provided for Australian War Memorial projects or to the organisation Open Arms, Soldier On could minimise defence and veteran suicide significantly.

Soldier On is Australia's only national fully integrated and holistic support services provider for veterans. Our vision is to enable veterans and their families to thrive by utilising the following 'HELP' model:

- Health and wellbeing services
- Employment support
- Learning and education programs
- Participation and social connection

By looking at issues of health and wellbeing more broadly, rather than exclusively death by suicide, Soldier On enables veterans to lead healthier and happier lives; this prevents many individuals from reaching the stage where they may consider suicide altogether. Preventative measures such as these, without having to make them in reaction to a death by suicide, is what has saved so many lives and allowed hundreds more to live without the dark cloud of mental health issues hovering over them. In refining this Bill, the government must ensure that it acknowledges the role of organisations such as Soldier On and works in tandem with them to produce the best outcomes for Australian service and ex-service members. Soldier On can work very efficiently on the issue, without the delays typically associated with government. Independently, these organisations have had profound impacts on hundreds of lives; with increased government cooperation and backing, the potential for the ongoing support of veterans and their families is vast.

On existing government agencies, Soldier On has met many vested individuals who report that the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs are not working effectively enough. There is no single source of authority to marry the two departments, and transition programs such as the Defence Force Transition Program and the Career Transition Assistance Scheme are inadequate. Current DVA claim processing times are up to 12 months, in addition to potential prior waiting time whilst dealing with Joint Health Command, we are losing lives in the interim. The current insurance provider model which DVA functions with is not supporting veterans, and often prioritises money saving over veteran wellbeing. Being this under resourced is beginning





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poverty cycles for veterans; one missed payment and their housing and wellbeing can often come under threat. Ex-service members have circumstances which often require far greater support than what they are getting. The Commissioner must look at potential improvements within the agency such as increasing numbers of case managers, taking a compassionate approach rather than a cynical one, and paying advocates of the DVA for their work. Actioning change from within the department is not viable; government departments require external pressure in order to reform⁵. DVA requires an overhaul and recommendations list formed by a productivity review and handled by an implementation team who can see the changes made swiftly and effectively. Tabs must be kept on DVA, changes such as these would make profound differences to the lives of every person registered with DVA.

National Commissioner: A tick in the box?

The Commissioner must maintain its autonomy and have explicit roles and objects to operate by if it is to serve a useful purpose. We commend the Federal Governments' acknowledgement of the systemic issues contributing to defence and veteran suicide, as well as the necessity of taking a "trauma-informed and restorative approach." We find several of the points outlined in the legislation to be compelling; however, there are several concerns which should be addressed to make the Commissioner a beneficial institution.

A number of phrases within the Bill and explanatory memorandum are very heartening, chiefly: "enduring public accountability" and "continuous independent voice to government." Accountability will be an especially important factor in the ongoing appointment of a Commissioner; The Commissioner and government must, respectively, remain accountable to the public on making worthwhile recommendations and seeing them actioned effectively. From this Commissioner we must gain information that we do not already know, rather than 'insights' which have already been made by other organisations. Thus, it is important that no person or entity should be untouchable to the Commissioner, particularly the government agencies. Keeping track of DoD and DVA is paramount in ensuring better outcomes for this demographic. We acknowledge that this could be a difficult matter in terms of government liability for a suicide, but it is necessary in identifying trends and preventing their perpetuation.

⁵ From an interview with Lt Gen Peter Leahy (Ret'd): Chairman of Soldier On, 03/10/2020





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It is unfortunate that this Commission must be reactionary rather than preemptive. Soldier On stresses the need for more regular submissions from the Commissioner to Government, rather than the solitary annually scheduled submission. While the wording of the Bill specifies that a Commissioner “may, from time to time, give the Prime Minister and the Minister” further updates, this seems not to be an anticipated occurrence. With more regular reports made, the Commissioner and, in turn, Government will be able to see more nuanced statistics and trends coming to light which a yearly report may not elucidate. Twelve months is too long for these at-risk individuals to be waiting between updates from Government. Additionally, staff working for the Commissioner must have Defence backgrounds or be Defence informed so that they may work with empathy and understanding as to the issue.

The following section will discuss some of the issues which Soldier On anticipates and that the Commissioner should address.

Scope: Seeing the bigger picture

As previously stated, the Commissioner faces a significant issue in defining the scope of its practice. Soldier On believes that looking only at official deaths by suicide and their circumstances is not enough to fully understand the trends of suicide amongst current and ex-serving members of the ADF. Further points of inquiry should include death by misadventure or any out of sequence death, education for medical practitioners, and the family law system for current and ex-serving members.

Deaths through risk taking behaviours, overdoses and other forms of misadventure are not currently counted or considered in defence suicide statistics. This is leading to an under representation of the problem; serving members and veterans are more likely to take greater risks and cause their own deaths through unorthodox methods. Defence people can and have found creative ways to commit suicide, so that it may not always appear as such. The scope of what constitutes suicide must be broadened to ensure that the Commissioner does not miss trends which exist but are not acknowledged.





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Psychological autopsies are fundamental; the Commissioner must gain as much relevant information as they can from vital sources such as veterans and, particularly, veterans who have planned or survived a suicide attempt. Service and medical records, DVA claims histories, and input directly from veterans who have spent time in hospitals will all be of the utmost importance. Soldier On also urges the Commissioner that up to date, collated suicide information should be provided to relevant organisations with full transparency.

Education on Defence suicide must be provided to regular medical practitioners. GP's and mental health workers are usually not trained to deal with the increased complexity of patients who are or have been in the ADF; if these practitioners are enabled to better understand defence and veteran affairs, this will subsequent in a smoother claims process at DVA. Relevant data should be supplied and explained to the different crafts in order that they may provide at-risk individuals with the best possible services for their situations. Additionally, a reporting line for GP's which allows them to supply information about the case to relevant authorities and institutions should a veteran suicide. These all amount to better education on Defence and veteran affairs and pathways, leading to far better outcomes in future.

Family law has a huge impact on the mental health and wellbeing of military families, it is without doubt killing people and will continue to do so. Defence members and veterans have extenuating circumstances which the family law system is not equipped to adequately deal with; Issues involving defence family separation, financial burdens, and mental health issues all negatively affect outcomes for this demographic. "ADF Families are not surviving and our current family law system is not resourced to deal with the additional complexity that arises when dealing with the separation of a Defence family⁶." Divorce rates among serving and ex-serving members being consistently higher than those of the general public, this is an issue which affects these people disproportionately, and leads to situations in court which are unfavorable for the Defence member or veteran.

To combat this, the Commissioner must consider recommendations involving a reformed system which is informed and empathetic to ADF and former ADF families⁷. Potential points of reform should include: Employing practitioners who understand the complexities of Defence families, providing funded mediation and legal support for both parents, making these services ongoing should

⁶ From Deirdre Simpson, Veteran and Programs Officer at Soldier On

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situations change, and keeping cases out of court wherever possible. These will all reduce the burdens and strains placed on members and veterans in the event of a separation, leading to better outcomes and less deaths by suicide.

Boots on the ground: Profound impact to lives

Soldier On is always about preventing suicide, we are the people who bring hope to the table. Change on the ground is what will prevent further deaths by suicide; improvements to mental health systems, medical and financial support, as well as family services are the key players in prevention. There are too many people not currently accessing the support they are entitled to; the Commissioner must endeavour to change this and see every defence member and veteran getting adequate attention.

Ex-Service Organisations (ESO's) are at the heart of veteran engagement; addressing Defence and veteran deaths by suicide must involve something of a coalition between ESO's and Government. These organisations allow the most at-risk group, veterans, to find new forms of identity and meaning and to share their experiences with people who can empathise. Soldier On believes that with increased funding, and not to the exclusion of other organisations, we can do even better than ever in supporting veterans and their families to thrive, thus preventing further suicides.

The Commissioner must see real and marked differences made on the ground to individual lives. Change instituted at Federal level with no results locally for those concerned is not going to solve this issue.

Conclusion

Defence and Veteran suicides are an issue which Australia has been dealing with for a long time, and with which Soldier On is very familiar. There will never be one definitive answer to the problem, but we have suggested the areas which a Commissioner must broaden their focus to include.

A whole of Government and country approach, including corporate and non-profit organisations vested in the issue will see suicides minimised. Consultative and collaborative





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processes are vital in delivering the best results for our service and ex-service members, they will see relevant and profound changes made.

In supporting the establishment of a National Commissioner, Soldier On is assured that this apposite feedback will be taken on board and considered seriously. At this stage, any action from Government is appreciated but should not supersede or exclude organisations such as Soldier On who are on the ground every single day saving lives. Given the opportunity and increased funding, Soldier On can affect even more change and reach more individuals in different ways, serving a superior purpose.

Ivan Slavich
CEO

