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Friday, February 3, 2023

Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans

The responses below have been prepared by Bowls Australia to assist in the ongoing Royal Commission into Defence Force and Veteran Suicide. Bowls Australia endeavors to ensure that the sport is inclusive to all members of the community through adaptive sports programs and partnerships with organisations such as Bowls Gr8 for Brains and Invictus Australia who support Australian Defence Force veterans and their health outcomes that result in their time spent in service.

In addressing the terms of reference:

- a. Current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence.

Each year there are approximately 6,000 ADF members who transition out of service - of these, 18% are discharging for medical reasons. Later in life, nearly 50% of those who served encounter mental health concerns.

Bowls Gr8 for Brains (BG4B) is a community based and peer supported physical and mental health initiative that introduces people living with mental health challenges to an activity and sport that is community based, inexpensive, inclusive, and accessible to everyone.

Programs such as this one not only support those dealing with mental health concerns, but they also help proactively address issues from arising in the first place.

A key partnership includes Veteran Sport Australia (VSA), also known as Invictus Australia, who have identified BG4B as an opportunity to provide veterans with inclusive, supported, and safe opportunities to transition into community-based sports.

VSA focus on female veteran opportunities to play an inclusive sport, this is particularly injured veterans. The BG4B program transitions veterans to pathways in the Bowls Australia's (BA), Women in Bowls programs and All Abilities programs.

VSA's partnership provides contact with veterans via newsletters, social media, and email regarding the BG4B project. Sharing of the positive BG4B stories to veterans is hoped to encourage and inspire.

A recent participant of a BG4B program attributed their recovery from PTSD after 26 years of service to Australia to the sport of Bowls which provided an environment that allowed them to reintroduce socialisation into their life. It also provided a space for them to reconnect with their children who also enjoyed the sport. Using adaptive sport, they were able to continue their newfound interest in their own backyard during COVID lockdown restrictions. Creating these new memories positive memories has helped them to move on a focus less on their past traumatic workplace experiences.

b. The role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the Australian Defence Force into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide.

BA lends support to not-for-profit organisation BG4B, who aims to minimise the risk of self-harm and suicide through empowerment, engagement, training and strengthening relationships through participation in bowls.

BG4B focuses on four key elements of improving mental health, those being physical exercise, re-integration into social environments, stimulating brain functions and engaging in programs that divert attentions away from previous trauma, with a peer-supported community-based program that runs at local bowls clubs.

Working together, the relationship provides support for the national community and access to local bowling clubs to interact, engage and build healthy relationships and seek to improve the mental wellbeing of the Australian community.

BA provides staff to assist in the delivery of BG4B programs, introductory coaching and training to volunteers, and advice on fundraising initiatives and promotion through its own channels to increase participation levels.

[Support for mental health through Bowls GR8 for Brains](#)

Invictus Australia in collaboration with BA also host community Veteran Family Bowls Day's providing an opportunity for veterans to not only try Bowls in a safe and friendly environment but also provides a social networking opportunity. A participant of a recent family day in Ballina, of the Cherry Street Bowling Club explained that the event transformed her and her husband's life through connection with their community as well as through participation. The same participant is now an active member of her local bowling club and assists with attracting new members to the club, specifically veterans.

[Bowling in Ballina](#)

Another example of a successfully hosted family day took place nearby the Williamston RAAF base where many retired servicemen and women frequent – Raymond Terrace Bowling Club. Like Cherry Street, the Raymond Terrace Bowling Club is community focused and welcomes all ages and abilities welcome. The club also provides opportunities to connect with the wider community, not just members who can share similar experiences and can understand what Defence Force veterans have been through.

The club also focuses its energy on creating a team-based participation opportunities which has been identified as an important experience sought when transitioning out of a workplace environment, particularly those found in the Defence Force.

[Raymond Terrace Veteran and Family Bowls Day](#)

A recently discharged Navy veteran with 21 years' service who manages his PTSD, anxiety, and depression explains that Bowls offers a similar team environment which he missed after leaving the Navy. He also likens the competition pressure of competitive sport to the pressures of a war fighting environment where the success of a team can come down to a single shot. He enjoys that the sport of Bowls is truly inclusive, allowing veterans managing injuries limiting movement, amputations, mobility, and mental health to be supported.

c. The Australian Defence Force's use of adaptive sport.

Although an adaptive sports association does exist within the Australian Defence Force, there is little requirement for adaptive sports for active members due to the requirements injured members must undergo after sustaining injury during service. When a member is injured, they are typically placed on a recovery program that requires them to follow a rehabilitation restricting them from participating in any additional physical activity.

Suggestions by Defence Force veterans include whether the adaptive sport program could be used during the discharge transition for injured members and help facilitate their integration back into civilian life. This may be done through a locally based bowling club where the member could participate in the sport casually to begin with while learning the sport and becoming comfortable in the new environment. This would also require the club and participant to have access to an adaptive sport program training and equipment.

d. Whether there are any gaps in services and demand for adaptive sport by the veteran community, and, if so, how these gaps can be addressed.

RSL clubs, like bowling clubs are also potential hosts of adaptive support the veteran community through programs. Challenges that they also face are centred around equipment, facilities and trained staff which will vary between clubs. Although there are 1,135 RSL clubs around Australia in addition to bowling clubs, they are not evenly spread geographically across the population meaning there are potential gaps within regional locations especially.

In terms of development pathways available to veteran bowlers, there is a potential gap for those who live with mental and/or some physical conditions. For Australian international representation opportunities, there are two pathways offered to bowlers - Open and Para. Open is for all bowlers and Para is for bowlers who are eligible to be classified. Currently the international opportunities in the Para space are for athletes with a physical disability who meet the classification criteria and athletes with a visual impairment. There are also opportunities through Deaf Sport Australia and Deaf Bowls Australia for athletes with a hearing impairment. For veterans who fall outside of the classification criteria, whilst they can still pursue international representation in the open pathway, there aren't currently disability specific opportunities which account for the full spectrum of health conditions that veterans may leave the Defence Force with. For example, a veteran living with a mental health condition such as PTSD who may require adaptive sport options may not feel comfortable participating in an open development pathway but also not be recognised as a para-athlete.

Although Invictus Australia supports the sport of Bowls, the 30 sports they send athletes to represent at their international competition each year, the Invictus Games, does not include Bowls due to low funding and resources.

A development pathway enabling the sport of Bowls to focus on this cohort of bowlers and their unique development needs is required to support veterans. At club level, BG4B offers this in four locations nationally with six additional locations in the planning process and/or securing funding. Beyond club level, there are also no specific adaptive sport competitions for veterans at state or international level outside of the Invictus Games. Given the connection and sense of belonging team sport offers veterans, more competition opportunities would also be welcomed by the veteran community and their own development pathway may be worthwhile considering.

e. The equitability of current funding for adaptive sport, and how the accessibility of adaptive sport can be improved for veterans who are not a part of Invictus programs.

Bowls Australia's Rookie Rollers All Abilities kits consists of equipment designed to meet the needs of participants of all capability levels. Specialised equipment for participants of all abilities

includes a bowling arm and ramp. Currently there is no funding for these kits. Clubs must purchase these kits through Bowls Australia's online store. They are not mandatory for clubs to own indicating that clubs may not be set up for Defence Force veterans who are managing physical injuries.

To improve the accessibility of adaptive sport for veterans, equipping all clubs (RSL and bowling) with Rookie Rollers All Abilities kits to ensure that veterans feel welcomed and included from the first time they enter a club. To improve accessibility of adaptive sport, consideration should be made to the contents of the kit to ensure that the equipment meets the physical needs of as many veterans as possible which would require additional funding.

The growth of the program is also limited by the volunteer hours required to administer veteran focused programs such as BG4B. With the number of highly qualified volunteers in some states minimal.

Being able to administer appropriate activities as well as being able to conduct interventions for program members who are living with mental health related conditions requires additional funding that is not typically covered by grant funding awarded to run programs. Increasing the number of qualified volunteers would ensure confidence in program quality and safety for participants. On average, one Bowls G8 for Brains session requires 40 hours of volunteer time – inclusive of program delivery, travel, administration, and training.

As referenced above, there competition opportunities of veteran bowlers are limited. Funding for additional events such as a World or Pacific Veteran Bowls Championship would allow veterans to represent their country at an elite level who may otherwise miss out under the current open and para development pathways. Alternatively, integrating a veteran focused competition into an existing event such as the Australian Open and/or extending the expertise currently in place in the high-performance space may also be feasible with the appropriate funding to expand venue and staff capacity along with staff having the relevant training and experience.

- f. The potential for a centralised authority to play a role in coordination or resourcing to provide access and where appropriate, enable consistency, in the use of adaptive sport to support rehabilitation, transition or reintegration for serving members and veterans around the nation and across support services and organisations.

Bowls Australia currently manages inclusive programs through a Diversity and Inclusion Manager who works internally as well as with external organisations such as Invictus Australia and BG4B. A dedicated department for sport or mental health and wellbeing doesn't exist under the current central authority - the Department of Veteran Affairs but could have a positive impact on the way adaptive sports such as bowls is delivered across the country.

g. Whether eligibility for the Australian Sports Medal, or similar recognition, should be extended to teams that participated in the Invictus Games prior to 2018 and other veterans' teams representing Australia in international events.

As highlighted above, there are very few opportunities currently that qualify bowlers for the Australian Sports Medal. Under the current definition, the only events that the sport of Bowls participates that meets this criterion is the Commonwealth Games making the eligibility for the Australian Sports medal to athletes in general. As Bowls is not currently part of the Invictus Games program, or other international veterans sports meet there are no veteran candidates applicable to be potential recipients for this medal currently.

h. Any other related matters.

N/A

Yours faithfully,

David van der Waal
Program Manager
Bowls Australia