

Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
Homelessness in Australia – 29 July 2020
Answers to questions on notice from the Veterans' Affairs portfolio

Question 1

Outcome: 2 Program: 2

Topic: Risk factors for veteran homelessness

(Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Hansard Proof 29 July 2020, p. 35)

Mr Andrew Wallace asked:

CHAIR: What are those workshops telling you are the reasons why our some of our veterans are homeless?

Ms Cosson: These are some of the top issues that they raised for our attention. They often delay seeking support. When they first leave the military service, they want to think that they can continue to find their way outside of the military, and therefore they think they'll be right and they'll just continue on, and then they'll get to a crisis point when they do reach out. Sometimes they have complex medical issues, if they have been medically discharged. Some may have some mental health issues and don't want to share accommodation with someone else; they would rather be alone. When they transition out of the military, sometimes they're in an area where there's potentially a lack of housing affordability, whereas during service they may have been living in soldiers' quarters or may have been in receipt of rental assistance, and then they find it a little bit of a struggle. Those are just a few of the issues; there are others, which we can go through if you like. But importantly, from our perspective, those veterans who came forward to participate in that workshop were just so open with us and they just wanted to help us [inaudible] we need to do for our veteran community, and that's where our efforts have been—on how you look at those risk factors and decide to respond to those as our priority.

CHAIR: Perhaps you could provide those other risk factors and what the department is doing to address those on notice. Ms Cosson: Absolutely. I could do that now or on notice, but we're certainly placing a lot of emphasis on and investment into these areas. But I'm happy to provide that on notice, if that's what you'd prefer.

CHAIR: We'll see how we go for time.

Answer

Engagement with the sector and veterans with lived experience has highlighted risk factors unique to veterans:

- Veterans will often delay help until a crisis point is reached.
- Military training makes rough sleeping an option not a last resort.
- Veterans with a medical or administrative discharge due to mental health face high levels of risk.
- Veterans report they do not have the life skills to manage when a crisis occurs, such as unemployment or financial stress.
- Veterans can feel socially isolated due to the loss of 'defence' family and minimal community connections during service.

- Veterans believe mainstream services will not understand them or don't want to engage with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) or the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) due to a negative discharge experience.
- Mental health and anger issues results in difficulties with sharing housing or accessing residential aged care.

The Government is concerned about any instance of homelessness among former members of the ADF, and has significantly invested in addressing the risk factors associated with homelessness. Any veteran who finds themselves homeless or at risk of homelessness is encouraged to contact DVA on 1800 555 254 or Open Arms on 1800 011 046 who will work with them to access appropriate support. Open Arms is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and can provide access to crisis support for those in need.

Tackling the risk factors that lead to homelessness amongst veterans and their families is a key priority for DVA. Early intervention is crucial and significant investment is focused on addressing the risk factors that often lead to homeless. This includes:

- Free mental health care for life, which is needs based, uncapped and available to any veteran who has served a single day in the ADF;
- DVA-funded mental health services including those provided by psychiatrists, general practitioners, and allied mental health providers, pharmaceuticals, and inpatient and outpatient hospital treatment;
- White Cards for transitioning members and needs-based transition support, including a greater on-base presence with Veteran Support Officers (VSO) available to all serving and transitioning ADF members;
- Employment support through targeted rehabilitation programs that support vocational and non-vocational outcomes, education and training support;
- The Prime Minister's Veterans' Employment Program increasing employment opportunities for veterans by raising awareness across industry of the skills and experience that veterans can bring to the civilian workplace;
- \$16.2 million over four years to Soldier On, Disaster Relief Australia (formerly known as Team Rubicon) and the RSL to deliver veterans' employment programs across the country. This funding will help these organisations provide direct support for veterans to translate their existing skills, build new skillsets and find civilian employment;
- The Veteran Payment for those in financial difficulties while their claims for a mental health condition are being determined;
- Specialised counselling and peer support through Open Arms;
- 'Time- Out' crisis accommodation through Open Arms;
- Intensive crisis management support for those veterans most at risk, through its Coordinated Client Support and the Wellbeing and Support Program;
- Financial support for the purchase of psychiatric assistance dogs for veterans with PTSD, in addition to the trial underway with La Trobe University to build the evidence base.
- \$30m funding for a network of Veteran Wellbeing Centres in six locations across the country to deliver a one-stop-shop for veterans' support services, ensuring closer integration and coordination of government and non-government support, including connections with local health services, community organisations and advocacy and wellbeing support;
- Funding the Stepping Out Attention Reset (SOAR) trial, which will evaluate a computer-based attention control training designed to re-calibrate an individual's attention and threat

- detection system. This will support ADF personnel that are due to transition to civilian life;
- Free comprehensive health checks for the first five years post transition to help identify issues early.

DVA is also committed to enhancing partnerships between state and territory governments, specialist homelessness service providers and DVA and Defence, to further improve housing outcomes for veterans and their families. DVA included a commitment in its Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and National Action Plan 2020-2023, released by Minister Chester in May this year, to work with homelessness service providers to tailor programs and services to reduce veteran homelessness. More information on the plan can be found at: www.dva.gov.au/mental-health-strategy.

One of the ways this approach is being actioned is through a new partnership between DVA and the Community Housing Industry Association, which will help housing providers better understand veteran-specific needs and supports.

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Question 2

Outcome: 2 Program: 2

Topic: Vulnerability of homelessness between male and female veterans

(Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Hansard Proof 29 July 2020, p 39)

Ms Peta Murphy asked:

Ms MURPHY: Would you say—if you can't, I understand—that, of the different causes of vulnerability of homelessness between male and female vets, domestic violence is the biggest factor? Ms Cosson: To be honest, I don't want to try and guess that one. Ms MURPHY: That's okay. Ms Cosson: I'll take that on notice, if that's alright. We might have the data, but I just don't have it to hand, I'm sorry

Answer

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019 report *Use of homelessness services by contemporary ex-serving Australian Defence Force Members 2011-17* is the Department of Veterans' Affairs' current primary source of veteran homelessness data.

The report does not measure domestic violence as a reason for ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) specialist homelessness service (SHS) clients seeking assistance from a SHS agency (reasons measured include accommodation, financial, interpersonal relationships, health, and other).

When a SHS client seeks assistance from a SHS agency, the agency assesses which services the client needs. An agency may then provide the client with this service, or may refer the client to another organisation.

The AIHW 2019 report found that ex-serving SHS clients who required domestic violence services were almost exclusively female. Fifty-three per cent of female ex-serving SHS clients were found to also need domestic and family violence services (compared to 4 per cent of ex-serving males). Of those that needed these services, 95 per cent were provided to them by their SHS agency. This finding aligns with the association between the use of domestic and family violence services and the use of homelessness services by female SHS clients among the broader general Australian population.