



26 January 2023

**Re: Request for submission – Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee**

Dear Mark

I write in response to the request for submission of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for the inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force (ADF) veterans. Please find below Defence Families of Australia's (DFA) initial responses to these requests.

Since 1986 DFA has been the Ministerially appointed group representing the equities of the families of current serving ADF members. As the official advisors to Government and Defence, DFA advocates for ongoing improvement in policy and practice. Our aim is to reduce the negative impacts of military service on ADF families, and to support the positive aspects of this unique Defence lifestyle. Right now, the Defence community faces the biggest set of stressors in a generation. Consequently, DFA's work is more important than ever. It is my honour and duty to lead the organisation through its next phase of evolution to drive positive change for the Defence community.

A full list of the advocacy goals currently being pursued by DFA can be found in the DFA Advocacy Map. This tool is published biannually to encourage collaboration and input from the community to achieve these goals. The map can be downloaded at: <https://dfa.org.au/advocacy-map/>.

**The benefit of adaptive sports for veterans and their families**

A range of wellbeing models for ADF veterans and their families cite social connection and physical wellness as key pillars of a healthy, happy family (i.e. those of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Department of Defence). While a proportion of veterans experience physical impairment, adaptive sports offer a valuable means for both social connection and improved physical health. The connection between exercise, socialisation and improved mental health outcomes are also well documented. These benefits apply to veterans and their family as much as any subpopulation.

Some veterans experience a sense of loss of identity and community upon transition out of full time military service with the ADF. Adaptive sports offer one means of reconnecting with this community, and mitigating some instances of negative experience related to identity and connection. It may also offer a means of connecting with like minded people who are not themselves veterans, broadening their social support network.

While not all veterans have a negative experience on transition out of military service, the prevalence found in a number of studies with strong academic rigour suggests that action is required to support those who do require support. Insofar as is possible, no service personnel or their families should be at a detriment for the service given to their country. Australians have a responsibility to enable our veterans and their families to thrive.

Since the Centenary of ANZAC in 2014-2018, the public discourse and awareness of issues facing some veterans has been high. Building on this foundational awareness, the issues specific to or keenly felt by some families of current or former serving ADF members are now gaining prominence. This benefits not just the family, but the veterans themselves as a key part of that family unit. DFA are pleased to see an increase in family involvement of support services, including adaptive sports programs. If we, as Australians, can improve the inclusion and support where needed for military families this will have flow on effects for:

- the wellbeing and prosperity of current and former serving veterans and their families
- the recruitment, retention, and reputation of the Department of Defence,



- successful reintegration to civilian life post-service for veterans
- local and national economies through increased engagement and reduced illness or need for social welfare support.

### **Nationalisation and centralisation of adaptive sports for veterans and their families**

While there are benefits to a centralised authority to coordinate and resource adaptive sport activities for veterans and their families across Australia, DFA recommend that these activities not be solely insular. There is an opportunity for cross-connection between members of the Defence and veteran community with other cohorts of civilians, some of which may have some similar impairments or limitations. The ability to connect veterans with the broader Australian community is also beneficial to veterans growing a sense of identity not exclusively connected to the ADF. This would maximise social connection, a key pillar of wellness.

DFA recommends that a centralised authority to resource adaptive sports programs for veterans and their families have in place clear metrics for accountability and return on investment, to ensure best use of funding and to generate data to increase resourcing over time as required to allow any members of the community who wish to be involved to have a means to do so.

DFA also recommends that the below key limitations for veterans and their families to access adaptive sports are considered in the Committee's report:

- **awareness:** the community's awareness of opportunities relevant to them, by need, ability and geographic location (or remote options).
- **availability:** the resourcing and vacancies of adaptive sports programs relevant to them.
- **accessibility:** the ability of the community to access these programs, due to geographic location, timing, or necessary support such as transport or service enablers (e.g. participants with special needs).

### **Recognition and reward for participation in adaptive sports**

DFA supports the proposal of veterans sporting teams being eligible for the Australian Sports Medal or similar recognition. The rationale behind this position is that medallic recognition may:

- prompt greater awareness of the experiences, talent and challenges facing some veterans among the general public of Australia
- increase awareness of adaptive sport involvement options for veterans and their families, leading to increased uptake of these activities

A key consideration for the Committee would be whether or to what extent veteran family members are eligible and recognised. It is important to acknowledge the unique nature of military service, but it is clear that families enable this service. Should family recognition be recommended, care should be taken not to conflate these two different types of service to our nation.

I would welcome you to contact me to discuss matters of Defence families further.

Yours Sincerely,

Sandi Laaksonen-Sherrin  
**Defence Family Advocate of Australia**  
**Defence Families of Australia**