

The Veteran Community

The veteran community is generally perceived within the wider community as a special group with specific circumstances. It is widely considered that a higher prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression exists within the veteran community when compared with the wider population. Additionally, evidence from the governments' study on the *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans* (1998) identified that the children of Vietnam veterans were a high-risk group for suicide or accidental death.

The Australian Government, through the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), currently spends approximately \$129.5 million annually on mental health services targeted at the veteran community.

Policy to support better mental health for the veteran community

The Australian Government mental health policy, *Towards Better Mental Health for the Veteran Community* was developed in 2001 within the context of the National Mental Health Strategy (NMHS) and its five-year plans. The DVA mental health strategy is working to effect similar goals and changes as the NMHS by pursuing the following key objectives:

Enabling a comprehensive approach to mental health care

Through this strategy, the veteran community is able to access integrated mental health care, incorporating strategies for prevention, early intervention, treatment, rehabilitation and maintenance of good mental health.

Responding to specific mental health needs

DVA is refocusing attention towards broader veteran mental health needs (not just PTSD) and developing strategies to address the impact of alcohol and substance use, and the mental health problems of the aged. It is also developing ways to improve access to mental health care for those living in rural and remote locations.

Planning and purchasing effective services

DVA has become an informed funder and purchaser that targets its mental health resources in a way that best meets client need, is evidenced-based, and provides best value for money.

Strengthening partnerships and participation in mental health care

DVA ensures departmental decisions about veteran mental health care demonstrate added value through active participation of service users, ex-service organisations, providers and the Australian Government Department of Defence. It has also developed collaborative relationships with other key stakeholders, including the Australian Divisions of General Practice, the Mental Health Council of Australia, and the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health (CMVH).

Programs for the veteran community

The government has introduced a number of initiatives that aim to reduce the burden of mental health problems and illness in the veteran community. These are explained below.

Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service

Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS) provides a range of free counselling services for veterans and their families, including crisis counselling and after hours telephone crisis counselling, group programs, an outreach program to rural and remote areas, referral to other services, and information and education. In the 2003–04 financial year, there were 15 VVCS counselling centres throughout Australia providing front-line mental health services, as well as approximately 320 DVA contracted outreach program counsellors (OPC) operating in outer metropolitan, rural and remote locations. Over this period, VVCS provided 21,514 centre-based counselling sessions, and OPC provided 39,518 counselling sessions.

Alcohol Management Project

The Alcohol Management Plan was developed as a response to the Vietnam Veterans Health Study and DVA's mental health strategy. It aims to create opportunities to reduce alcohol related harm in the veteran community by increasing awareness of alcohol related issues and strengthening services for veterans with alcohol related problems. The project is addressing the high correlation between alcohol and comorbid mental health conditions in the veteran community.

Crisis relief

The crisis relief or Time Out program provides Vietnam veterans in crisis with supported time-out accommodation to help manage a crisis situation.

Applied Suicide Intervention and Skills Training

The Applied Suicide Intervention and Skills Training allows members of the veteran community to participate in an ex-service community initiative for access to ASIST conducted by Living Works, where DVA pays the fees for members of the veteran community to attend.

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

DVA through contractual arrangements provides significant financial support to the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) to assist the Department in progressing its mental health strategy and ensure best practice is adopted and applied in the treatment of veterans with mental health concerns. The ACPMH provides a range of support to the DVA including research and advice on veteran and military mental health, identification of best practice, advice on purchasing and the provision of mental health services, and the delivery of awareness, education and training activities.

Long Tan Bursary under the Veterans' Children Education Scheme

Education is a buffer to the risk of self-harm and the Long Tan Bursary and scheme aims to help the transition to education by providing study assistance.

Treatment under the *Veterans' Entitlement Act 1986* (VEA)

In 2004, DVA broadened the eligibility for mental health treatment. All eligible veterans can now get treatment for anxiety and depression under the *Veterans' Entitlement Act 1986* (VEA), regardless of whether these conditions are service related. Previously, only Vietnam veterans had access to such treatment. This will enable veterans to receive help as early as possible to improve their health and wellbeing.

Workforce participation

The Australian Government, through DVA, offers a range of programs to support veterans, including those with mental health conditions, in improving workforce participation. The programs include:

- **The Vietnam Veterans' Rehabilitation Scheme**, which helps veterans to find, or keep, suitable employment.
- **The Transition Management Service**, which ensures that members of the Australian Defence Service discharging on medical grounds make a successful transition from military to civilian life by providing access to the full range of information and services that are available to assist in their transition.
- **The Stepping Out Pilot Program** in Townsville, although not specifically for those with mental health conditions, include some Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel who are leaving the ADF as a result of experiencing mental health problems. The program aims to increase awareness of appropriate psychosocial skills and behaviours to assist in their transition from military to civilian life.
- **The Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Scheme**, introduced in 2004, helps to promote effective rehabilitation and retention in the ADF. It supports ex-serving members to return to work or maximise their functioning in their community.

Research and data

Mental health has been identified as a key research area within DVA, and the department has a number of research projects identified in the short to medium term. One significant piece of research commissioned by DVA was the *Pathways to Care* research in 2004. The research was able to provide an analysis of a number of indicators including a correlation between which veterans (by conflict) were receiving help for a mental health condition, how they received this help and from where, and the level of mental health services (or non service) they received. The *Pathways to Care* research identified areas for further mental health policy planning, in particular around access to mental health services, and mental health literacy and awareness.

The DVA is in the process of developing a mental health datamart as part of an extensive health centred data warehousing project that will provide a more rigorous account of referral patterns, identification of pathways to care and expenditure. Once operational, the datamart will better inform policy and planning around mental health.

Stakeholder involvement

Several initiatives exist where DVA aims to improve stakeholder participation in veteran mental health care and broader initiatives. In 2004, the Repatriation Commission released a consultation paper describing mental health reforms that will strengthen assessment, treatment and continuity of care and improve access to a broader range of mental health care for veterans, including a greater emphasis on community-based care in line with the National Mental Health Strategy. Ex-service organisations, health providers and other interested organisations provided insightful comment on the range of initiatives outlined. The department continues to progress this initiative.

Further information on the mental health consultation paper is available on the DVA website at: <http://www.dva.gov.au/health/younger/mhealth/policy/index.htm>.

Similarly, the government announced the establishment of the National Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum (NVMHW Forum) in 2004. The NVMHW Forum is an avenue for ongoing discussion on mental health issues between the veteran and defence communities, DVA, the Department of Defence, and the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) at the national level. The forum is chaired by the National President of the Returned Soldiers' League, Major General Bill Crews (Rtd).