

Executive Summary

This submission intends to show that any Institute of Veterans' Advocates should be entirely independent of The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). At the same time advocate members of the institute should enhance the operations of DVA in ensuring the quality of training, development and practice of advocacy service delivery while offering a service which cannot be delivered by DVA.

The consultation document does little to change the status quo. DVA already has all the features which would ideally belong to the institute. It proposes the day to day operation of the institute would be performed by DVA staff. We have seen over the last three years that there is a revolving door of staff into and out of the Advocacy Training and Development Program (ATDP) and where none of those staff have any qualifications or experience in advocacy or training and assessment.

The institute and its advocate members must be able to earn the trust and respect of the veteran community, something which DVA cannot say exists between itself and veterans.

Preamble

Advocacy services are delivered on behalf of Ex-Service Organisations (ESO) as a service to the constituency they seek to serve and support. The services are provided by volunteers and employed¹ staff of the ESOs.

In planning the formation of an Institute of Veteran Advocates, consideration must be given to what currently exists. One must understand how the present environment came to be, what strengths and weaknesses exist in that environment and how a proposed change can improve the current environment. Important too is identifying the measures for determining the efficacy of the changes.

Comparison must also be made with similar environments and how they operate. Consider advocates within the National Disability Insurance Scheme are not controlled by the Department of Human Services.

The Department of Social Services (the department) funds the National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP) to provide people with disability access to effective advocacy support.²

In the view of this writer, an Institute of Veterans' Advocates must provide value to the employers of advocates¹ (ESO) while at the same time supporting a system of advocacy service provision in which the users of the service have confidence in the skills, knowledge and consistency of practice of the advocates from whom they seek assistance.

The consultation document seeks to establish an Institute which is entirely under the control and direction of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). This is in fact the present operating environment. DVA owns the training course; it assumed total control of the database established by a volunteer on behalf the system responsible to ESORT and it determines the rules for advocates to appear on the register.

¹ In this context, employee is both a salaried advocate or a volunteer member.

² <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-programs-services-for-people-with-disability-national-disability-advocacy-program-ndap-operational-guidelines/list-of-agencies-funded-under-the-national-disability-advocacy-program-ndap>

DVA needs to be a partner, consultant and close stakeholder in the institute but at arms length from its operation and the advocate members. DVA needs to consider how its operations can be enhanced by the advocates associated with the institute and exploit that advantage.

Features of the institute

The following must be features of an institute.

- Entirely independent of government or a department.
- A proprietary company with membership
- A board
 - which has certain directors appointed for a limited period bringing certain identified expertise and
 - other directors elected by certain classes of members,
- Members belonging to certain membership classes.
- Staffing comprising
 - salaried staff who manage the day to day aspects of the institute and
 - committees, comprised of institute member established by the board for ongoing and temporary projects.
- Ownership of the Course in Military Advocacy.
- Ownership and complete control over all IT systems deemed essential for the operations of the Institute.

Conclusion

As stated before, the provision of advocacy services is a responsibility of ESOs. It is not and should not be, a service provided by DVA. There is much evidence of an empirical, anecdotal and sworn nature that suggests veterans generally distrust DVA. To have DVA involved to any significant degree in veteran advocacy, means veterans would be unable to trust advocates. This must never be the case.

What must be established is a National Veteran Advocacy Program funded by DVA where veterans can find and contact advocates through the institute. That program would be administered by the institute and the providers would be the sponsoring ESOs of the advocates.

The institute and its advocates can compliment DVA services. DVA must identify how advocates can enhance its operation and compliment its services and exploit those advantages.

Should DVA have control over all aspects of advocacy services would mean a severe reduction in volunteer advocates and those remunerated advocates and their ESOs would shrink to silo-like operations and a nationally consistent standard of training and quality assurance would be lost.

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About the author

Greg Hoving has been a practising advocate for some 20 years after undergoing training under the Training & Information Program, later becoming the National Training Manager of that program and its successor program, Advocacy Training and Development Program (ATDP).

Greg is a life member of the RSL and continues to practise under the auspices of a sub-Branch of the NSW Branch.