

Government Response to the Vietnam Veterans Family Study

Introduction

Improving support and services for families of veterans is a key focus of the Government's Veteran Centric Reform agenda. The Vietnam Veterans Family Study, released in October 2014, has contributed significantly to the direction of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA's) transformation agenda.

The study found the majority of sons and daughters of Vietnam veterans are leading healthy and productive lives. However, some families of Vietnam veterans are more likely to have significant emotional, physical and social problems when compared to families of those who served during that era but did not go to Vietnam.

Prior to the 2013 election, the Government committed to release the study and to consult extensively about its findings through the Ex-Service Organisation Round Table (ESORT), the peak ex-service consultative forum within my department, to guide a formal response from Government. The consultation through the ESORT has concluded and I offer my sincere thanks to all those who contributed.

The major themes that emerged from the consultation were calls for:

- further improvements to mental health services, including education and communication;
- increased collaboration between DVA and the Department of Defence (Defence), particularly as members transition out of the Australian Defence Force (ADF); and
- further research into the impact of military service on current and former serving members and their families.

I would like to highlight some important initiatives introduced in recent years to address these issues and this Government's intentions to take further action to improve the health and wellbeing of current and former serving members and their families.

Transforming DVA

In addition to the particular health needs of groups such as Vietnam veterans and their families, the support required by Australia's veterans is changing: pre-1999 veterans and their dependants continue to age; younger veterans who have served in operations from Timor to the present have different needs, with a greater requirement for tailored and ongoing support services; and finally, in this digital age, veterans expect service delivery to be as seamless as possible, intuitive and coordinated.

This presents challenges and opportunities for DVA. Its systems, processes and technology have evolved over the decades to provide standardised transactional entitlements and income support to a large group of clients. Its business support systems are outdated and unable to meet the future needs of veterans and their families. To address this, the Government is investing \$24.8 million to design a transformation program to deliver better customer service for veterans, underpinned by better processes and technology. In addition, \$23.9 million has been allocated to allow DVA to maintain its current compensation processing systems while developing the detailed transformation program.

This major overhaul of DVA's ICT systems will significantly improve the way the Department does business and, consequently, provides services to veterans and their families. The aim is to transform DVA into an agile agency, focused on providing a seamless, personalised experience that meets the needs of veterans and their families throughout their lives. It is a rare, once in a generation opportunity to transform veterans' relationship with government and realign the focus of the DVA.

Veteran Centric Reform is in line with the Government's broader reform agenda, which is about ensuring that government agencies are effective and efficient. It will deliver a more personalised experience for veterans, focused on early intervention and coordinated care, built on a new ICT platform for the department.

A key enabler of *Veteran Centric Reform* will be the *Early Engagement Model*. Under this initiative, Defence will provide DVA with basic details, including contact information, for all new members of the ADF from 1 January 2016. The information will allow DVA to establish a record for new personnel from the day they join the ADF, allowing DVA to provide information on services and support, and encourage early lodgement of claims for service related conditions.

In addition, Defence will be able to provide DVA with details of all members separating from the ADF from 27 July 2016. Over time, this will mean that DVA will have most current and former members of the ADF recorded as clients. This is in contrast to the past when DVA only knew about current and former members when they made a claim (about 20% from recent conflicts) or, more recently, when Defence started passing transition information to DVA, in some cases allowing the member to opt out.

Mental Health

Tackling the mental health challenges facing veterans and their families is a key priority for the Government. Both Defence and DVA have made significant improvements to the provision of mental health care since the Vietnam era, and this was acknowledged by ESORT during consultation.

Latest available figures indicate that the Government spends around \$187 million per year on mental health treatment for eligible current and former serving members and their dependants. This funding is demand-driven and not capped.

The Government significantly expanded its commitment to mental health in the 2016-17 Budget, providing DVA with \$46.4 million to extend and streamline eligibility for non-liability health care arrangements for mental health conditions to all current and former permanent members of the ADF, irrespective of how long or when they served, or the type of service.

Since 2009, Defence has invested approximately \$201 million (as at 30 June 2016) to improve mental health education, training, screening, and treatment and rehabilitation programs, that support ADF members and their families to access mental health care as early as possible.

In July 2014, eligibility for counselling services through the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) was extended to additional eligible service groups¹, their partners and dependent children up to the age of 26 years, and to the partners, dependent children and parents of members killed in service-related incidents. In the 2016-17 Budget, the Government committed \$3.1 million to further extend access to VVCS to include family members of current and former ADF members who die by suicide or reported suicide; siblings of ADF members killed in service-related incidents; Defence Force Abuse Taskforce complainants and their families; and adult sons and daughters (over 26 years) of post-Vietnam War veterans.

This Government has also provided \$2.1 million over two years from 2016-17 to the Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation to provide tailored services for the children of current and former ADF members with mental health conditions. Kookaburra Kids runs free camps to offer children of a parent with a mental health condition both respite from their carer role and the chance to participate in a range of fun activities with other children experiencing similar circumstances.

¹ Newly eligible groups include personnel with border protection service, service in a disaster zone either in Australia or overseas, service as a submariner, personnel involved in training accidents resulting in serious injury and members who have been medically discharged.

The Government is committed to ongoing education and communication activities to ensure veterans and their families know where to access help if they need it. DVA and VVCS have transformed their approach to education methods to include online and eLearning programs, multimedia tools and interactive smart phone applications.

DVA is also investing in building mental health workforce capability by funding Phoenix Australia—Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health as a national base of expertise in veteran and military mental health. This Government has committed a further \$6 million from 2016-17 to support the establishment of Phoenix Australia's Centenary of Anzac Centre to provide clinical research and professional leadership for veterans' mental health.

Defence-DVA Collaboration

Defence and DVA are working closely together on a broad range of issues, from research to policy through to service delivery. The transition period is a key focus of the increasing collaboration between Defence and DVA. Transition management, including the support role played by families, is a priority issue for the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Veterans' Mental Health, established in March 2014.

DVA's On Base Advisory Service (OBAS) has been extended and is now on more than 44 ADF bases nationally and offers a channel for ADF members to make an early connection with DVA to receive information about services, entitlements and support available through DVA.

Since September 2014, the Secretary of DVA has been writing to members separating from the ADF to advise them about the support and services that DVA could potentially provide them.

Improvements will be made to the transition process for separating members of the ADF that will include ensuring all individuals leave Defence with separation documentation, such as their individual transition plan, record of service, record of training and deployment, final payment and leave entitlement summaries, and copies of unit medical records.

Defence and DVA have also been working to provide better support to medically separating members who have existing ADF rehabilitation plans. If a member discharges from the ADF on medical grounds, they may also be able to access an invalidity benefit under military superannuation arrangements from the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation. In addition, following discharge, all ADF members can access a one-off health check from their general practitioner to help identify any physical or mental health concerns for treatment or referral to other services, if required.

The Government will continue to strengthen ties between Defence and DVA to ensure that ADF members and their families have access to seamless and high quality services and support throughout their service, during and following their transition to civilian life. Priorities include continuation of mental health care and education, and ensuring that those who need care are not lost after transition.

Future Research

This Government is dedicated to commissioning further research into the impact of military service on current and former serving members and their families.

DVA and Defence are collaborating on the \$5 million Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme to examine the impact of contemporary military service on the mental, physical and social health of serving, ex-serving ADF personnel, and their families. This research includes the Family Wellbeing Study, investigating the challenges experienced by families of transitioned ADF members and

comparing those challenges to those experienced by families of current serving members. The Government expects to receive the findings of the Family Wellbeing Study in late 2017.

In direct response to the ESORT feedback, DVA will commission a research project to undertake analysis of the data gathered in the Vietnam Veterans Family Study about the effects of military service on spouses and partners.

The MRCA Rehabilitation Long-Term Study is another joint DVA-Defence research project underway, which aims to examine the effectiveness of rehabilitation arrangements under the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA) within both the ADF and DVA, over the long term. A range of aspects will be explored, including consideration of the role and impact on families. The initial findings from the study may not be available before 2018.