


7 March 2025



Department of Veterans' Affairs  


Carers NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Government in response to the exposure draft of Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024 (the Strategy). Carers NSW welcomes the development of the Strategy and commends the inclusion of families within the draft Strategy as an integral part of the defence and veteran community.

However, Carers NSW believes that the Strategy must also go beyond families, recognising carers within the defence and veteran community. This will ensure that the draft Strategy acknowledges and responds to the experiences and needs of carers. The Strategy should also align and integrate with other key Australian Government initiatives aimed at improving carer outcomes including the recently released National Carer Strategy. Furthermore, Carers NSW believes that outcomes and activities should be extended to ensure that initiatives targeted at addressing family and carer needs are included and that all activities in the Strategy are evaluated for effectiveness in also improving outcomes for families and carers.

Carers NSW is the peak non-government organisation for carers in New South Wales (NSW). A carer is any individual who provides care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug and/or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail. Carers NSW is part of the National Carer Network and a member of Carers Australia. Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, and our goals are to:

- Be a leading carer organisation in which carers have confidence
- Actively promote carer recognition and support
- Actively support carers to navigate a changing service landscape that will be characterised by ongoing policy reform
- Promote connected community experiences and opportunities for carers that are inclusive of diverse carer groups
- Lead and advocate for carer-specific and carer-inclusive policy making, research and service delivery
- Continue to be a quality-driven, responsive and carer-focused organisation.

Thank you for accepting our submission.   


Yours sincerely,



## Introduction

Carers NSW welcomes the development of a Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and commends the Australian Government's progress thus far investigating and working to improve the lives of defence members, veterans and their families. Carers NSW also commends the Australian Government for recognising the important role of family as central to many defence members and veterans' and the impacts of service on the broader defence and veteran communities. However, Carers NSW believes that the Strategy must go beyond acknowledging families to also recognise and include family and friend carers to ensure that the Strategy reflects and addresses the experiences and needs unique to defence and veteran carers.

It is important to note that all family members are carers, and not all carers are family members.<sup>1</sup> Further, while many carers who are related to the person they care for provide care due to familial obligation,<sup>2</sup> caring often extends beyond regular familial duties and responsibilities, with carers supporting to meet the additional needs of the person they care for related to disability, mental illness, chronic or serious illness or drug and alcohol dependency. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide highlighted that carers of defence members and veterans may support with a range of activities. This includes attending appointments, participating in the planning and delivery of rehabilitation and therapies, contacting medical professionals, navigating service systems, and providing practical care, domestic assistance social support, emotional support, and enabling participation in community life.<sup>3</sup>

While many carers choose to provide care, caring can have significant impacts on carers' health and wellbeing, as well as their social and economic participation. For young carers, aged 25 or under, such as a young person caring for a parent, grandparent, friend or neighbour who is a serving member of the defence force or veteran, impacts of caring can also have long term effects on mental health, physical health and educational and economic outcomes.

Carers NSW believes that, in line with carer recognition legislation and the National Carer Strategy<sup>4</sup>, which recognise veteran carers, the draft Strategy must acknowledge carers and include carers in the intended outcomes and activities of the Strategy. Carers NSW believes that inclusion of carers is vital for recognising and addressing defence and veteran needs, with the National Carer Strategy highlighting that veteran carers often go under recognised, while experiencing significant impacts of their caring role.

## Carers of veterans

Carers of veterans face similar challenges to the broader carer population, including reduced participation in employment, poorer health and wellbeing and increased social isolation.<sup>5</sup> Carers of veterans also face additional and unique challenges associated with caring for a veteran including re-integration, navigating complex systems and coping with injuries sustained while serving.<sup>6</sup> Due to the nature of combat, veterans are more likely to experience polytrauma—requiring intensive care and support—that has been shown to increase carer distress.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth Carer Recognition Act 2010

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024) *2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Summary of findings*.

<sup>3</sup> *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (2024) Final Report*.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Social Services

<sup>5</sup> Griffin, J., Lee, M., Bangerter, L., Van Houtven, C, Friedemann-Sánchez, Phelan, S., Carlson, K. and Meis, L. (2017), 'Burden and Mental Health Among Caregivers of Veterans With Traumatic Brain Injury/Polytrauma', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 139-148.

<sup>6</sup> Easom, L., Wang, K., Moore, R., Wang, H. and Bauer, L. (2018), 'Operation family caregiver: Problem-solving training for military caregivers in a community setting', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 74, no. 4, pp. 536-553

<sup>7</sup> Griffin et al (2017).

In addition to physical injuries, veterans commonly experience post-traumatic stress disorder, leading to changes in behaviour and personality and an increased risk of suicide, adding to the complexity of the caring role and increasing the emotional toll on carers.<sup>8</sup> International research also shows that veteran carers tend to have more prolonged caring roles due to the younger age at which veterans experience injuries or trauma.<sup>9</sup> As a result, carers of veterans commonly report anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and chronic distress.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, carers of veterans often experience a wide range of negative effects such as physical stress, emotional distress, social isolation, and financial instability.<sup>11</sup>

Common to the general carer population, carers of veterans often put the needs of the person they care for above their own.<sup>12</sup> There are numerous factors that form barriers to carers of veterans being able to prioritise their own health and wellbeing needs, including lacking motivation and time, their own pre-existing mental health issues, and fears of leaving the family member or friend they care for alone, particularly in cases where there is heightened risk of suicide.<sup>13</sup> As a result, carers of veterans require support to address their own needs, including emotional support, peer support and respite. To address these challenges, Carers NSW believes that the Strategy must consider the roles of carers in supporting defence members and veterans and ensure that an outcome of the Strategy is the improved mental health and wellbeing of family and friend carers, as part of the defence and veteran community.

Additionally, carers of defence members and veterans have also expressed the importance of recognising the needs of children of veterans, who may also have caring responsibilities, and ensuring they receive adequate support. For example, one study found an association with increased anxiety amongst children where carers were busier with both work and care, indicating the importance of supporting the whole family unit.<sup>14</sup> Carers NSW believes the Strategy must acknowledge the experiences and needs of young veteran carers and ensure that their needs can be adequately met through activities and initiatives.

### **Ensuring defence and veteran carers are well equipped to provide care and support**

Carers of veterans commonly report a desire for greater education about the veteran's condition (including mental health conditions), how to best manage their condition at home and support services available indicating a desire on the part of carers to improve the quality of life of the person they care for. Australian and international evidence supports the importance and benefits of carer inclusive veteran support for both veterans and their carers in reducing rates of depression and anxiety among carers and veterans, and increasing the sustainability of their caring role.<sup>15</sup> Carers NSW believes that under *Goal 3: Facilitate timely access to quality care and support*, initiatives that aim to build the capability and confidence of defence and veteran carers to provide care and support to the person they care such as carer education programs will improve outcomes for both carers and the defence members and veterans they care for.

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<sup>8</sup> Post D, Barrett A, Baker A, Kernot J, Parfitt G (2022) A qualitative exploration of the physical and psychological wellbeing of family carers of veterans in Australia. *PLOS ONE* 17(6): e0269012. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269012>.

<sup>9</sup> Easom et al (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Post et al (2022).

<sup>11</sup> Shepherd-Banigan, M., Sherman, S. R., Lindquist, J. H., Miller, K. E., Tucker, M., Smith, V. A., & Van Houtven, C. H. (2020). Family caregivers of veterans experience high levels of burden, distress, and financial strain. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 68(11), 2675-2683.

<sup>12</sup> Post et al, (2022).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Easom et al (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Moriarty H, Winter L, Short TH, True G. (2018), Exploration of Factors Related to Depressive Symptomatology in Family Members of Military Veterans With Traumatic Brain Injury, *Journal of Family Nursing*, 24(2):184-216.

Carers may also be vital in identifying and responding to signs or episodes of suicidality by defence members or veterans given the high level of contact with the people they care for and that they commonly provide of emotional and behavioural support. However, carers may require additional information, education or support to enable them to identify or respond to suicidality. Carers may also require additional support during periods of suicidality of the person they care for due to increased intensity of the caring role and additional emotional stress.<sup>16</sup>

Carers themselves may also experience suicidality as a result of the prolonged psychological impacts and socially isolating nature of caring.<sup>17</sup> However, it is well established that despite having high contact with health professionals and care services, carers commonly are not asked about their own needs. As such, Carers NSW believes that greater awareness of potential defence and veteran carer suicidality is needed to ensure that key service providers and health professionals are aware of and can identify and respond to risks of carer suicidality.

Carers NSW believes that under *Goal 5: Prioritise suicide prevention initiatives*, it is vital to include actions that aim to enable carers to effectively identify and respond to suicidality, provide additional support to carers that are supporting someone else experiencing suicidality, increase awareness of the risk of carer suicidality and build the capability of Department of Veterans' Affairs and Department of Defence staff, health professionals and care providers who often have high contact with carers to identify and respond to carer suicidality.

### **Connecting and creating a community of defence and veteran carers**

Due to the demands of their caring role, carers of veterans may require increased services to address social isolation.<sup>18</sup> Research has also highlighted that carers of veterans with increased family or social resources had better mental health and wellbeing compared to those with fewer family or social resources.<sup>19</sup> One strategy to address social isolation includes the provision of social support groups for carers of veterans who are in a similar situation and are able to provide support to one another. Increasing social support will likely reduce the social isolation experienced by carers of veterans. Carers NSW believes that this can be achieved by including tailored social supports for defence and veteran carers, such as carer peer support initiatives under *Goal 4: Grow a positive and connected Defence and veteran community* of the Strategy.

Furthermore, ensuring integration with mainstream carer and mental health carer support services, within the Strategy, including Carer Gateway, that also provide social and peer supports for that can be accessed by defence and veteran carers, will also strengthen access to these services and supports.

## **Conclusion**

Carers NSW thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to respond to the exposure draft of the Strategy. This submission highlights ongoing opportunities to improve support services for veterans and their carers. Carers NSW believes that ensuring that the Strategy recognises and includes targeted measures aimed at improving carer mental health and wellbeing will likely result in optimal outcomes for defence members, veterans, families and carers.

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<sup>16</sup> Post et al (2022).

<sup>17</sup> Suicide Prevention Australia (2022) Suicide among carers: Policy positing, available online at: <https://www.suicidepreventionaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/SPA-Suicide-Among-Carers-Policy-Position-Statement-October-2022.pdf>,

<sup>18</sup> Shepherd-Banigan et al (2020).

<sup>19</sup> Moriarty et al (2018).