

Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024 Exposure Draft

Mates4Mates submission

Introduction

Mates4Mates is a leading veteran charity in Australia, dedicated to supporting current and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members and their families who are impacted by service-related physical and psychological injuries. Our comprehensive services include mental health support, physical rehabilitation, social connection activities, and skills for recovery programs. We are committed to empowering veterans and their families to improve their quality of life and overall wellbeing by helping them to reconnect and recover.

In this submission, we will provide general feedback and also briefly address each of the six goals outlined in the strategy, providing insights and recommendations based on our experience and the needs of the Defence community.

General feedback

We commend the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs for developing the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2029. The strategy's vision to empower and support the Defence and veteran community for optimal mental health and wellbeing aligns closely with our vision of *"An Australia where all members of the ADF community are supported physically, psychologically and socially"*.

Mates4Mates agrees in a shared approach to fostering a culture that supports mental health and wellbeing as outlined within the Strategy. Mates4Mates would like to see mental health, wellbeing and associated enablers at the centre of that culture. We would also like to see transparency in how culture is set and enabled and for the Strategy to explain "how" the shared approach to mental health and wellbeing will work, particularly on page 4.

On Page 3, the strategy mentions investment in wellbeing, culture and health and safety and then outlines the framework of *The Defence Culture Strategy: Defence Culture Blueprint Program 2023* and *The Defence Work Health and Safety Strategy 2023-2028* as examples of this. The Strategy might benefit from the inclusion of specific investments that the Australia Government has/is committed to in this section. In the spirit of transparency, it would also be useful to explain how the Defence community can become aware of what will be included in proposed departmental action plans.

Mates4Mates supports the expected outcomes and associated timeframes on Page 5, although it would be useful to include specific suicide risk factors for which suicide will be decreased.

The importance of social determinants of health to quality of life and life expectancy cannot be overstated, so it was encouraging to see the strategy acknowledge a proactive focus in this area, which will be required to inform trends and future approaches.

Mates4Mates welcomes the proposed monitoring and evaluation framework, which is a significant change to the way DVA currently works. The commitment to transparency is also promising and we look forward to the action plans being publicly available.

Goal 1: Promote and assist wellbeing

Promoting and assisting wellbeing is fundamental to preventing mental health issues and enhancing the quality of life for veterans and their families. It is pleasing to see that Goal 1 emphasises collaboration between the

Federal, State and Territory Governments. To improve self-agency in wellbeing, we suggest that Goal 1 acknowledge the need for health literacy improvements.

We also recommend that the strategy emphasises the importance of accessible services that address various aspects of wellbeing, including mental, physical, and social health. Collaboration with organisations like Mates4Mates can enhance the reach and effectiveness of these initiatives through the services that we deliver.

At Mates4Mates, we offer a range of services designed to support wellbeing:

- **Mental Health Services:** We provide psychology, counselling, and social work services to help individuals manage their mental health and improve their quality of life. These services are available face-to-face through our Veteran & Family Wellbeing Centres and via telehealth, ensuring accessibility.
- **Physical Rehabilitation:** Our rehabilitation services are designed to help individuals recover from physical injuries and improve their overall wellbeing. This includes tailored exercise programs and support from qualified professionals, such as Physiotherapists and Exercise Physiologists
- **Social Connection Activities:** Recognising the importance of social support, we offer regular opportunities for mateship and peer support through social and family activities. These activities help reduce social isolation and build a sense of community amongst veterans and their families. In 2025, Mates4Mates will also be introducing outcome measures to determine improvements in wellbeing for our clients.
- **Skills for Recovery Programs:** We provide a range of clinically focussed programs that equip individuals with practical skills to aid in their recovery and enhance their resilience. Examples include pain management, sleep and healthy relationships.

Goal 2: Improve mental health and wellbeing through prevention and early intervention

Mates4Mates agrees that early intervention is crucial in addressing mental health issues before they escalate. We suggest that Goal 2 should include identification of risk factors that can lead to poor mental health. For example, financial stress and the role that DVA plays in compensation could also be a focus in this area.

We suggest that Goal 2 might also benefit from the inclusion of health promotion and education initiatives about the importance of early intervention and develop resources to support proactive outreach and education efforts.

Goal 3: Facilitate timely access to quality care and support

Ensuring veterans and their families can access high-quality care in a timely manner is crucial for effective treatment, recovery, and overall wellbeing. At Mates4Mates, we work to reduce barriers to access by offering flexible, responsive, and professional services tailored to the unique needs of those impacted by military service.

The specific mention of preventing and minimising moral injury in Goal 5 is a key acknowledgement of the impact moral injury can have on mental health and wellbeing.

Goal 4: Grow a positive and connected defence and veteran community

We agree that building a positive and connected community fosters a sense of belonging and support, which is vital for wellbeing. Veterans may experience isolation, particularly if they've recently transitioned out of a close-knit Defence community. Having a community of like-minded people can be an important part of wellbeing and

recovery. At Mates4Mates, we hold regular social connection activities for veterans and family members throughout the week and on weekends, to provide a safe place to build connections.

Mates4Mates contributes to this goal by:

- **Facilitating Peer Support:** Our social connection activities provide platforms for veterans to connect with peers who understand their experiences.
- **Family Inclusion:** Recognising the vital role of families in a veteran's life, we offer programs that involve partners and children, strengthening family bonds and support networks.
- **Community Partnerships:** We collaborate with other organisations and community groups to expand support networks and resources available to veterans.

We are hopeful that the implementation of Goal 4 will result in more government support for the delivery of services that enables organisations such as Mates4Mates to provide social connection activities to veterans and family members, **particularly those activities that are outcomes focussed to improve personal wellbeing.**

Goal 5: Prioritise suicide prevention initiatives

Suicide prevention is a critical concern within the Defence community and Mates4Mates is fully supportive of this goal, which takes a wide and collaborative approach to suicide prevention without trying to reinvent the wheel. We welcome the inclusion of lived experience in codesigning programs, initiatives and services that contribute to suicide prevention.

Goal 6: Use evidence and data to drive positive outcomes

Data-driven approaches are essential for effective mental health and wellbeing program development and evaluation. We support the alignment with the Australian centre for Evaluation to ensure best practice and also recommend continued and strengthened collaboration with research institutions to contribute to the evidence base on veteran mental health and wellbeing and assist in guiding decision making.

Conclusion

Mates4Mates supports the goals outlined in the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024 Exposure Draft and appreciates the commitment to improving mental health, wellbeing, and support for the Defence and veteran community. We recognise the importance of a shared approach, transparency, and evidence-based solutions in fostering a culture of wellbeing. The goals proposed in the strategy are vital to addressing the complex needs of veterans and their families, and we are encouraged by the emphasis on early intervention, community connection, and suicide prevention.

Our submission reflects our deep commitment to supporting the Defence community through a range of tailored services. We believe that by continuing to prioritise collaboration, accessibility, and the integration of lived experience into program development, we can make meaningful progress in improving outcomes for those affected by military service. We look forward to the continued evolution of the strategy and to working together to ensure the ongoing health, recovery, and wellbeing of all Defence and veteran community members.