



Submission to the Exposure Draft of the 'Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024'

Friday 14 March 2025

This is a submission by the Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA) to the public consultation of the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024 Exposure Draft.

Religious wellbeing support for a predominantly non-religious Defence Force

We note that the shared vision of Defence and Veteran Affairs for the mental health and wellbeing strategy is:

Members of the Defence and veteran community are empowered and supported for optimal mental health and wellbeing during service or employment, during transition to civilian life and beyond.

Yet, the Defence Force is failing to meet the wellbeing needs of its service personnel – especially its non-religious personnel, who make up the majority of the workforce. Religion is a barrier to many Defence personnel in accessing suitable frontline wellbeing support.

Incredibly, in this modern age, Defence relies almost exclusively on religious chaplains, who have theological degrees and experience in church pastoring, for its frontline wellbeing support capability. As has been reported in *The Guardian*, the chaplaincy branches of Army, Air Force and Navy increasingly rely on [Pentecostal and evangelical chaplains](#) to provide this frontline service.

This is despite the *majority* of Defence personnel identifying as *not religious*. [Data from the latest Defence Census](#), published late last year, show that, as of 2023, 61 per cent of Defence personnel said they were not religious. This figure was up from 56 per cent



in 2019. Christian affiliation in the Defence Force, meanwhile, has continued to plummet, falling to just 34 per cent in 2019.

Chaplains are embedded alongside personnel in military units and ships. They are considered the “first port of call” for Defence members in need. Yet, non-religious personnel in Army and Air Force have *no option* to access a secular/non-religious chaplain or frontline wellbeing officer. Only the Navy provides a handful of secular wellbeing officers (known as Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officers, or MSWOs). Navy introduced the roles in 2020, having recognised the changing needs of its personnel.

A [review by an independent tribunal](#) has since found “strong demand” for the secular roles in Navy and considered that these roles had delivered a “complementary non-religious alternative” in helping to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of Navy personnel.

Official Defence data reveal the staggering lack of secular/non-religious frontline wellbeing support for non-religious personnel across the whole Defence Force. The initial 2022 interim review into Navy’s MSWO roles noted that the ratio of Christian chaplains to Christian Defence personnel was 1:134. On the other hand, the ratio for non-religious pastoral carers to non-religious personnel was 1:11992. For Muslims, the ratio was 1:62. For Buddhists, it was 1:83.

It seems possible, therefore, that thousands of Defence personnel – especially in the Army and the Air Force – are currently unable to access appropriate frontline wellbeing support.

While Defence’s public relations line states that chaplains serve “all” people – those of religious and non-religious backgrounds – [this is, clearly, a myth](#). For various reasons, many individuals do not feel comfortable in speaking to religious agents about their problems. Numerous people said as much in evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide.

Many Defence personnel, especially women and people who identify as LGBTIQ, would be deeply concerned about engaging with religious chaplains who have theological and ideological views that are at odds with mainstream Australia on all kinds of social issues.



The Air Force's own inquiry into inappropriate behaviour in its chaplaincy branch [identified concerns about theology](#) clashing with Defence values. It made a number of recommendations to combat the problem of "conflict/dissonance" between the faith of chaplains and Defence values.

In a [submission to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide](#), we detailed evidence of how chaplains could not provide non-judgemental care and how their worldviews were at odds with modern society and out of step with the culture that Defence was trying to develop. We included in our submission chaplains' comments from official Defence publications that showed, for example, negative sentiment towards non-religious people and towards same-sex relationships.

We are also troubled that the ADF is increasingly relying on Pentecostal and evangelical chaplains. Such Christians typically hold views that are widely considered to be at the fringes of mainstream society.

Defence also has many chaplains endorsed by mainstream churches that hold dogmatic and unpopular views on a number of issues. Mainstream churches have frequently spearheaded opposition to popular social policies – consider, for example, their positions on same-sex marriage, voluntary assisted dying, and access to abortion. The Catholic Church continues to tell Australian governments that voluntary assisted dying – now legal in all states – is really "suicide". It has also had a long history of viewing suicide as a "sin".

It is perfectly understandable, therefore, if Defence members personally dealing with any of these issues or in relation to loved ones will not want to consult with chaplains who originate from such religious institutions.

A former director-general of Navy's chaplaincy branch, Collin Acton, has been leading the push for secular reform of frontline wellbeing support across Defence. [In an article published by the Pearls & Irritations media outlet last year](#), he argued that Army and Air Force leaders "have their heads in the sand" and were "effectively disregarding the evolving needs" of their non-religious personnel.

Retired Principal Chaplain Acton warned that Defence's almost exclusive reliance on ordained ministers of religion posed an "inexcusable risk" to the health and wellbeing of our service personnel.



We support religious Defence personnel having access to religious-based chaplaincy. But the same opportunity must be extended to non-religious personnel to seek secular, or non-religious, frontline wellbeing support.

We believe that denying secular/non-religious frontline wellbeing support is fundamentally a human rights matter. As such, we intend to raise this case of religious-based discrimination against non-religious Defence personnel in a submission to the upcoming United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (Fourth Cycle) into Australia's human rights.

RACS: a block to secular reform

We are also deeply troubled about the alleged role of a taxpayer-funded committee of religious clerics – the Religious Advisory Committee to the Services (RACS) – in blocking much needed secular reform of the frontline wellbeing capability. As we outlined in our [submission to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide](#), RACS has been accused of forcing out of Defence reforming elements and entrenching religious chaplaincy.

Given that RACS does not even represent the majority of Defence personnel – those who are not religious – it is clearly time for change. Why do religious service personnel have representation through RACS, while the voices of non-religious personnel are denied any such representation? Why do religious community leaders have a formal role and direct line in advising Defence chiefs, while the voices of secular and non-religious community organisations are denied the same opportunity? It is not at all clear why Australian taxpayers should be funding such a statutory body to advise Defence on issues of religion.

Also, we have documented much evidence of RACS members and Defence chaplains viewing the role of chaplaincy in Defence as a missionary one. We detailed many examples in a submission to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide. Such evidence included:

- members of RACS saying publicly that chaplains were “missionaries in the Defence Force” and “ambassadors for Christ...participating in the mission of



Christ and pointing people to God”, and describing Defence personnel as “sheep” to be brought into the fold;

- chaplains speaking about building relations with Defence personnel to “remind them that there’s a God and that they’re never alone” and describing the chaplaincy role as providing the “peace, hope and calm that only comes from a relationship with Jesus”.

Many Defence personnel would be deeply troubled and uncomfortable about the thought of being the target of government-funded religious missionaries in their own places of work.

Defence, of course, is continually in a process of upgrading its hardware and software capabilities in an effort to protect Australia’s national security interests. Yet, the frontline wellbeing support capability – religious-based chaplaincy – has remained frozen in time despite the fundamental demographic changes that have occurred in Australia since the early 20th century. [As Retired Principal Chaplain Acton has said](#), if Defence were today tasked with building a frontline wellbeing capability from scratch, it certainly would not start with religious-based chaplaincy.

We urge Defence and Veterans Affairs to develop a modern wellbeing support capability that puts the needs of Defence personnel and veterans first, instead of religious interests.

Regards,

[Redacted signature]