

Supporting the health and wellbeing of Australia's Veterans and their families: 2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission

Introduction

The Returned and Services League (RSL) advocates for benefits, treatment and the welfare of ex-serving and serving members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and has led the nation in commemoration of their service. Established in 1916, the RSL is present across metropolitan, regional, and rural Australia with seven state and territory branches, almost 1,200 sub-branches and nearly 150,000 members.

The RSL supports veterans and their families in many ways, seeking to best respond as their needs evolve and change. Our sub-branches provide focal points for communities to gather, reflect and commemorate as well as provide social connection. Pragmatic services are delivered across the domains of wellbeing, including employment and education, urgent financial aid, and veteran homelessness services, as well as the cornerstone offering of navigating the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) claims and appeals processes. These services are based on ongoing veteran clinical health and social research, as well as Census data. The RSL nationally has an extensive network of partners that deliver physical rehabilitation services and peer led complementary programs.

The needs of veterans and their families are complex and varied. Successive inquiries led by organisations such as the Productivity Commission have identified the need for systemic change in the way Australia treats its veterans and their families. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide is yet another sobering call for urgent action for reform and it continues to identify the contemporary issues facing veterans and their families.

The RSL welcomed the Government's response to the Commission's interim report and of the funding commitments made in the October 2022 Budget to support implementation of the recommendations made in the report.

The 2023-24 Budget presents the Australian Government with the opportunity to further deliver on the commitments it made in its previous Budget, to sustain an effective response to the emerging findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission and to ensure that our service men and women are able to experience a healthy transition from service, engage in fulfilling civilian careers and continue to make positive social and economic contributions to our nation.

The RSL calls on the Government to comprehensively change the way in which Australia treats its veterans, to continue to make appropriate and sustained investment in enabling veterans and their families to maximise their capabilities to continue to contribute to our nation post-service.

We offer the following commentary for consideration in the planning of the 2023-24 Budget.

Budget priorities

1. Implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has called for feedback on the potential creation of *an entity with comprehensive oversight, responsibilities, and powers to drive the lasting reform to contribute to a reduction in the incidence of suicide and suicidality in serving and ex-serving ADF members.*¹

The RSL believes that an effective implementation body must be independent of Government and be established by an Act of Parliament. We have provided a detailed submission to the Royal Commission proposing the establishment, role and functions of a National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Wellbeing supported by a National Office for Defence and Veteran Wellbeing to guide and advise implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Call to Action 1: We ask the Government to make provisions within the 2023-24 Budget to appropriately fund the establishment of an implementation body, to oversee and guide delivery against the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, before the end of 2023, and for funding to be allocated over the forward estimates to support its ongoing operations.

2. Urgent and continued action to reduce the DVA's claims backlog

(i) Legislative reform

The RSL urges the Government to further invest in action to expedite simplification and harmonisation of veterans' entitlements legislation – the *Veterans Entitlement Act 1986* (VEA), *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act* (MRCA), and the *Safety Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence Related Claims) Act 1988* (DRCA).

The DVA's consultation on Veterans' legislation simplification and harmonisation closed on 14 November 2022.² DVA has shared that the department intends to begin with small steps as a pathway to legislative harmonisation, with the impact of each step on veterans and their families to be examined before the change is fully implemented.

While there is logic to this test and review approach there is no urgency nor recognition that DVA is overwhelmed with its existing workload. The proposed approach is likely to be prolonged and see veterans and their families continue to wait for extended periods of time for their claims to be processed; impacting their health and wellbeing.

As a provider of claims advocacy services, the RSL has a deep understanding of the legislative instruments and of the unintended consequences of their complexity, including how it contributes to DVA's claims backlog. We ask the Government to use the Budgetary process to enable swift action to expedite removal of some of the barriers and complexity created by Veterans' entitlement legislation, ahead of comprehensive action to achieve full harmonisation between the three

¹ Royal Commission Interim Report Pg. 147

² [Consultation on Veterans' legislation simplification and harmonisation | Department of Veterans' Affairs \(dva.gov.au\)](https://www.dva.gov.au/consultation-on-veterans-legislation-simplification-and-harmonisation) accessed 23 January 2023

different Acts. Specifically we ask for Budgetary provisions that can immediately help to simplify non-liability healthcare and funeral benefits for veterans.

Call to Action 2: We ask the Government to make provisions in the 2023-34 Budget to:

- Continue to fund timely and accountable action by the DVA to achieve harmonisation of the three different Acts (VEA, MRCA and DRCA) focused on the prompt delivery of new legislative measures that lead to outcomes which tangibly reduce the DVA claims backlog.
- Include provisions within the 2023-24 Budget to immediately extend eligibility for non-liability health care (NLHC) for mental health treatment to ADF reservists on completion of the enlistment process. This would require removal of the current requirement for veterans to have at least one day of continuous full-time service to qualify for NLHC.
- Include provisions within the 2023-24 Budget that enable harmonisation of the funeral benefits payable by DVA under the VEA, MRCA and DRCA so that all payments are aligned at the current highest maximum rate.

(ii) Increased processing capacity for DVA claims

The RSL calls on the Government to continue to invest in growing DVA's capacity to reduce the claims backlog and to meet future demand. To ensure that funding measures announced in the October 2022 Budget, such as for 500 additional DVA staff and improvements to the claims processing system, are effective in making a tangible reduction in the DVA claims backlog, the Department needs to be able to continually analyse staffing allocation and business processes. The Government can usefully develop more transparent consultation practices for working with ESOs, who hold expertise in identifying and addressing issues in the claims processing system, to inform practical action to reduce the backlog.

The Advocacy Training and Development Program (ATDP) was created for the volunteer and paid advocates who support veterans with their DVA claims. The involvement of an appropriately trained advocate can help ensure that claims presented to DVA are complete and have followed the correct procedure. Where this occurs, administration for DVA can be reduced and timelines for finalising claims decreased. As the needs of veterans change over time, so too must the training and information provided to those who advocate for them. We call on the Government to address this issue in the Budgetary process.

Call to Action 3: We ask the Government to make provisions in the 2023-34 Budget to:

- Review and as necessary recalibrate the funding measures announced in the October 2022 Budget to ensure they are delivering the intended outcome to reduce the DVA claims backlog.
- Make provisions to enable DVA to enhance the ATDP for volunteer and paid advocates.

3.Improved access to healthcare for veterans and their families

The provision of healthcare to Veterans does not operate in a vacuum, with the Veterans' system linking in with the wider Australian health network. Timely access to safe, affordable, and high-quality healthcare is a need of every Australian across all stages of life. Although the Australian public healthcare system is widely regarded as one of the best in the world, and despite successive Australian Governments prioritising funding for public healthcare, it has not been able to meet growing demand. Inequalities in services and access exist between regional, rural, remote and metropolitan areas, which negatively impacts on the 45 per cent of veterans who live in a regional area³.

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has heard about issues arising from the disparity between the DVA fee schedule and the fees that healthcare providers would otherwise charge clients – either through the private system or through other Australian Government schemes⁴.

Anecdotally we have been told that veteran healthcare providers are further struggling to refer their clients to specialist and clinical service because of the disparity in DVA remuneration and also because of the paperwork associated with servicing veterans. We are aware that this is particularly acute for veterans who need access to psychology and psychiatric services.

In 2019, the Productivity Commission called for an independent review into the fee setting arrangements of the DVA and how they can be set to promote accessible and high-quality care for veterans with service-related conditions (Recommendation 16.3: Independent review of fee-setting arrangements).⁵ While DVA did make some small-scale adjustments to the fee schedule in 2021, the disparity remains a significant barrier to the health and wellbeing of veterans.

Call to Action 4: We ask the Government to make provisions in the 2023-34 Budget to:

- Review and uplift the DVA fee schedule to ensure remuneration is better aligned to the actual cost of healthcare provision.
- Reduce the administrative burden placed on healthcare providers in accessing DVA remuneration.

The RSL urges the Government to answer the call to action to better support the health and wellbeing of Australian veterans and their families by using the 2023-24 Budget to remove some of the inequities and barriers that they continue to be experience in their quest to access timely, safe, and high-quality healthcare. RSL stands ready to support the Government in this work and to help further a community-wide response to better support the men and women who have served our nation. We would be pleased to provide further commentary about the information provided in this submission.

³ ABS, Census 2021, [Australian Defence Force Service](#), accessed 3 January 2023.

⁴ Interim Report, Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, August 2022

⁵ Inquiry Report No.93, Overview and Recommendations, A Better Way to Support Veterans, June 2019, p.72