

ROYAL COMMISSION: RSL ADELAIDE HEARING SUMMARY

Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

To keep you informed about the Hearings from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, the RSL Royal Commission Office has prepared a summary of the Adelaide Hearing Block, including key themes examined so far, and contributions made by the League, alongside their responses. RSL NSW will continue to provide these summaries periodically.

To date, the Commission has received 3,924 submissions and held 473 private sessions. The RSL continues to be present with representatives present at all hearings, and is listening to and acting on the evidence being presented.

During the eight days of the Adelaide hearing block, the Commissioners heard testimony on a broad range of relevant issues, including:

- Concerns about promotions, postings, career management and the effectiveness those managers have on improving mental health and social connection;
- The importance of improving primary prevention to minimise risk of injury and lasting impacts post-service;
- ADF-culture and the way State Emergency Services, Police and Ambulance deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and transition phases;
- Untenable turnaround times between a traumatic event occurring and redeployment resulting in poorer mental health outcomes;
- Frameworks aimed at improving veteran families in adjustment, relocation, minimising-postings and attempts to identify families at risk of DFV;
- Government frameworks which do not have mechanisms to hold Secretaries to account for poor outcomes and failings of their Department;
- Administrative burdens upon private practitioners preventing DVA clients from seeking and receiving help for complex needs;
- Mechanisms of mitigation to prevent backlogs from occurring again and ensuring that the current backlog of claims are dealt with promptly;

During the hearing block, the Royal Commission heard from representatives from the RAN, RAAF and Army, Department Secretaries, mental health, organisational and workplace reform professionals. The Commission also heard from Dr. Wheatley, a psychiatrist and former Doctor in the ADF highlighting concerns about the administrative burden faced by private practitioners, as well as the ability commanding officers have in overriding medical advice, which has been seen to lead to poorer physical and mental health outcomes.

The Adelaide Hearings heard from members of the Clearance Diving Branch providing powerful testimony about their lived experience. This included Michael Maley CSC DSM, Ashley Semmens, and Jeremy Thomas, who highlighted the poor medical equipment available to them during an operation in Sydney Harbour in 2009, and the effects it had on their mental wellbeing. They also made note about the poor support for mental health when it is raised with commanding officers often leading to a downgrade in medical classification and pay reduction, preventing help to be sought.

The RSL will continue to work closely with the Royal Commission to help guide their work and inform their recommendations. The Royal Commission will continue with two more hearing blocks in Melbourne, throughout August, and concluding in Sydney.

The Royal Commission will accept submissions until Friday, 13 October 2023. The Royal Commissioners have continued their support for submissions to be lodged as it aids to inform their work. The Final Report, and the Royal Commissioners' recommendations are due to Parliament no later than 17 June 2024.

The RSL continues to express its commitment to working with the government, ESO sector and veterans to coordinate a strong response needed to minimise the risk of suicide and maximise the wellbeing of Australia's Defence member and Veteran community.

Some of the work being undertaken by the RSL to support the Royal Commission and address the issue it identifies includes:

- Participating in the Royal Commission's Stakeholder Reference Group discussing systemic, cultural and structural issues contributing to suicide by serving and ex-serving Defence Members;
- Implementing the RSL Australia Mental Health Initiative in partnership with Open Arms;
- Helping to expand the nationwide network of Veterans Wellbeing Centres;
- Implementation of a nationwide research project to capture a broad range of insights from the Australian veteran community, with learnings to inform RSL's future strategy and support offering to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the veteran community;

The RSL has been working closely with its national network, states and sub-branches to provide ongoing support to veterans and families throughout the process of the Royal Commission.

If you are thinking about testifying, need support after listening to hearings or reading the media, or any other kind of help, the RSL Royal Commission Office can provide support or direct you to the appropriate support for your needs. The Office's contact details are submissions@rlsnsw.org.au or 0499 441 291.

If you, or someone you know, needs mental health support, you can contact:

- Lifeline Australia – 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467

- Open Arms (current and ex-serving ADF personnel and their families can seek this free and confidential support)- 1800 011 046
- ADF Mental Health All-hours Support Line (for current serving ADF personnel and their families) – 1800 628 036
- Safe Zone Support (for current and ex-serving ADF personnel and their families) – 1800 142 072. When you call Safe Zone Support, you do not need to identify yourself if you do not wish to.