

Opening Statement to Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Committee Inquiry into Suicide by Veterans and Ex-Service Personnel by David Jamison – ADSO Spokesman

Introduction

We are here today to discuss an inconvenient truth, that is, the disturbing number of veteran suicides. It is not just the number who have taken or attempted that final step but it is also that these tragic incidents have occurred within a cohort of men and women who are among the Nation's finest and who have been trained and conditioned to be resilient.

From the statements made by our leaders, it would seem that the intention to ensure a smooth transition from the involvement and experience of war through to post-ADF civilian life is there. This begs the question, why are we getting it so wrong?

Our political leaders regularly laud our serving and former ADF members and also acknowledge the important role played by their families.

In his recent address to the RSL Centennial Conference the Prime Minister said:

"You remind us that our freedoms have been bought at a great price,

We ask our soldiers, sailors and airmen and airwomen to shoulder a heavy burden for this country.

When we look back at Australia's treatment of veterans, the sad fact is that our actions have not always matched the best of intentions."

Mr Shorten stated at the same conference:

"We have not always fulfilled the duty we owe, to those who have done theirs.

Post-traumatic stress remains poorly understood and inadequately measured.

Shockingly, 1 in 10 of our fellow Australians who are homeless is a veteran.

Our country owes those who risked their lives in Australia's name better than this.

None of us have the right to tell people who were prepared to pay the ultimate price, that we cannot afford to care for them.

For all the memorials that enrich our landscape, there are no walls covered in poppies for veterans who would later take their own lives.

Yet their loss is no less, the sadness of their passing no smaller."

The Prime Minister was following on from what he stated when announcing the recent suicide prevention initiatives being trialled in Townsville when he stated tackling veteran suicide was “*one of the most important issues and responsibilities for our Government, for any government*”.

The comments by both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition find very strong support from a very vocal crusader in suicide prevention, the former Premier of Victoria and founder of **Beyondblue** Mr Geoff Kennett who in his keynote speech on Remembrance Day this year, urged all to declare war on suicide.

Basis of the Current Problematic Situation

Whilst many traditional ex-service organizations struggle to relate in a meaningful way to many of the more recent veterans and so fail to provide the peer support and camaraderie that is part of the ADF culture, we believe a significant factor contributing to the problem lies in the legislative framework on which support to veterans is based. The three rehabilitation and compensation schemes result in a very complicated system that sets up an adversarial claims process and a bureaucratic structure that many see as complicated and unfriendly towards veterans seeking support. It is abundantly clear from social media groups posts, that veterans from the more recent conflicts feel alienated and see “the system” as biased against them. This is despite the recent budget initiatives and the work by DVA to change its culture and simplify its processes to accept claims and provide the support veterans are entitled to. Add to this the slowness to recognise some conditions for instance the “Agent Orange” impact and now perhaps the effects from “Mefloquine”, and the use by the Commonwealth of its extensive medico/legal resources to query some claims, the clear impression among the more vulnerable veterans is that the “establishment” is against them.

The Way Ahead

There are a number of possible ways out of this. The first is to recognize that rendering operational service on behalf of the Nation forever changes those involved. No one comes away from an operational situation unchanged. With such recognition, a very strong case exists to provide lifelong health support for those ADF personnel upon discharge (i.e. gold card) rather than on reaching age 70. Those who have not been deployed but have health conditions resulting from their service should not be forced to go through a complicated and adversarial claims process, and should therefore on discharge, be automatically issued with a DVA specific conditions treatment card (White Card). As all serving and former ADF personnel are now entitled to a range of mental health support services, the issue of a DVA treatment card recognising that should as a matter of course be automatic as part of the discharge process. The issue of a DVA card could also act as an ID which would help identify individuals as a veteran on entry to a Federal or State Government support or justice system so that appropriate support services can be channeled to that individual.

There should also be more emphasis on veteran employment initiatives, and also peer support programmes which are proving to be effective and less costly and can be a vital and integral part of the matrix of support.

The Government should also recognize and give practical aid to the ex-service organizations move to increase collaboration and coordination between themselves. This would also include the development of veteran support centres such as being contemplated by the RSL and that proposed for the old Repatriation Building at 310 St Kilda Rd Melbourne. All this should be underpinned by a National Military Covenant which needs to be designed to provide a platform for the relationship between the Nation and its service personnel.

Conclusion

The men and women of the ADF serve the Nation with distinction. The Parliament must play its part to ensure their service is honoured with fair and just treatment during and after their service.

That concludes my opening statement