

21 May 2021

## **RSL Submission on the Themes for Consultation to inform the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide**

The Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the 'Themes for Consultation' to inform the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the forthcoming Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (the Commission).

RSL members from across Australia have contributed to this overall RSL response via their Branches and Sub-Branched. Members were also encouraged to make individual submissions if they preferred. The RSL membership overall provided positive feedback on the proposed themes of the TOR.

The RSL notes that the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) is facilitating this consultation process and that the RSL response will be directed to the Attorney-General's Department, who will draft the Terms of Reference and provide administrative support to the Commission which will be independent of government, DVA and Defence.

In responding to this consultation, RSL members highlighted long-standing concerns regarding the lack of implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries into the issue of Defence and Veteran Suicide, and from past Royal Commissions conducted on a range of matters.

To ensure this Commission's effective responsiveness to a range of critical issues it should be authorised to make interim recommendations at the earliest opportunity for prompt implementation. It is noted that this may require the amendment of legislation.

RSL members emphasised that the scope of the Commission should include non-fatal suicidal behaviour and suicidal ideation, in addition to suicide mortality, and should not be limited to only considering deaths by suicide that occurred during a specific date range. RSL members have voiced concerns that this may occur.

Another significant point raised by RSL members is the need for clarity between the role of the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention, and the function of the Commission - which will likely overlap. In addition to possibly adding a layer of unnecessary complexity and confusion there are concerns that responding to information requests from two authorities could risk detracting DVA personnel from processing veteran claims. The RSL therefore recommends that a clear differential be made between the two roles.

RSL members noted that the Commission "will be asked to have regard to previous relevant reports and inquiries" and strongly urge the Commission to consider the outcomes of all previous relevant inquiries and Productivity Commissions as a starting point to this inquiry. This could also include review of other government reports that considered the issue of suicide.

RSL members requested that the sentence "The Royal Commission will not be required to inquire into matters that it is satisfied have been dealt with by other inquiries" not be included in the TOR to ensure that a comprehensive review of all previous relevant reports and inquiries is undertaken.

In addition to the themes already outlined in the 'Themes for Consultation' RSL members recommended that the Commission's TOR should include the following:

- Examine the effectiveness, or otherwise, of current transition processes for serving personnel and their families.
- Examine the current ADF medical discharge system, including involuntary discharge.
- Explore the relationship between successful and engaging employment post service and suicidal behaviour.
- Consider all aspects of the veteran lifecycle (early life, in service, transition, beyond service) and examine all factors that contributed to individual examples of defence member and veteran attempted suicide, or death by suicide.
- Examine the evidence-based information and research that has been conducted into the suicide and suicidality of ADF personnel and veterans and its relationship to their mental health and the adequacy of the treatment service provided to those in need. On this basis of these findings make recommendations about what future research and clinical quality assurance could assist in identifying how the risk of suicide could be minimised.
- Examine current Australian suicidality data from other professions and nationwide statistics.
- Review current data on the suicidality of personnel and veterans compared with the other 'Five Eyes' countries (Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States) and consider if successful treatment approaches from one or more of these countries could be applied in veteran supports.
- Identify what future research and clinical quality assurance could assist in recognising how the risk of suicide could be minimised.
- Consider how to optimally oversight the provision of mental health care by the ADF and DVA moving forward, to ensure findings and recommendations that emerge about the causes of suicide and poor mental health can be appropriately implemented and operationalised.
- Examine the critical role that Non-Government Organisations and Ex-Service Organisations play in all aspects of supporting veterans and their families and the nature of their relationships with the ADF and DVA and consider the regulation, accountability and coordination of such organisations.
- Examine the needs, roles and effectiveness of chaplaincy and other support services within the ADF.
- Consider the impact of outsourced contract or other APS positions within Defence reducing the opportunity for 'respite' postings for serving personnel, who may have been injured but are capable of alternative work within Defence, or who would benefit from opportunities to experience more frequent integration with civilian communities during service, and greater opportunities for spousal employment and family connection.
- Review all aspects of DVA's claims processes that negatively impact on veterans' wellbeing.
- Identify and address the barriers to the execution of future, current and previous Inquiry recommendations about the implementation of suicide prevention programs and improvements to mental health services.
- Examine the role and effects of social media including the dissemination of disinformation.

The RSL has sought input into this submission from senior psychiatrists, recognised for leadership roles in veterans' mental health management.

The RSL reiterates its previous commitments to provide its full support to the Commission.

Yours sincerely



Greg Melick  
National President