

Advocacy and Achievements in Support of Australia's Veteran Community: Elevating Recognition and Providing Unwavering Support

Our commitment to Australia's veteran community is unwavering. We tirelessly advocate for and achieve significant milestones in supporting war widows, veterans, and families. Our goal is to honour their sacrifices, enhance their wellbeing, and ensure their voices are heard and respected.

Recognising and Honouring Sacrifices

- **National War Widows Day Initiative:** We are at the forefront, advocating alongside others for the establishment of a National War Widows Day on 19 October. With over 40,000 war widows and widowers across the nation, it's crucial that their sacrifices and services are acknowledged on a national scale. Several states and territories have begun recognising their contributions, paving the way for a unified day of remembrance and respect. New South Wales and Queensland commenced their state celebrations of this day in 2022; South Australia, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory began their celebrations in 2023.
- **Partner Employment Research Collaboration:** In collaboration with the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), we're supporting and partnering on initiative to evaluate and enhance the programs that assist partners of veterans in finding meaningful employment. We are dedicated to ensuring they receive the care and opportunities they deserve. By working together, we are committed to helping these incredible individuals find fulfilling work and the support they need to thrive.
- **Support Frameworks for Bereaved Families:** Working closely with DVA, Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA), and various community organisations, we're developing leading frameworks to provide robust support for families bereaved by suicide, acknowledging the unique challenges they face.

Enhancing Education and Support

- **Advocacy for Defence and Veteran Family Identifier in Schools:** We continue to push for the inclusion of a 'Defence and Veteran Family' identifier on school enrolment forms across States and Territories. This initiative aims to support children from serving and veteran families by recognising their unique circumstances and ensuring they receive appropriate support.
 - *This initiative is currently being progressed and supported in South Australia, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory. Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland have agreed to explore the merits of a "Defence and Veteran Family Identifier."*
 - *Friday, 6 October 2023 a [Joint Communiqué](#) from the Veterans' Ministerial Council acknowledged the impact of a transient lifestyle on Defence and veteran families, especially children, and considered the benefits of including a 'Defence and/or Veteran Family' identifier on school enrolment forms to enhance school-based support.*
- **Addressing School Zoning Regulations for Defence and Veteran Families:** We are actively advocating to improve restrictive school zoning regulations that significantly impact Defence and Veteran families. These families often relocate and face substantial barriers in securing consistent education for their children. We are pushing for priority enrolment status and the implementation of flexible zoning policies to ensure that Defence and Veteran families can access quality education

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with minimal disruption. Our efforts aim to enhance the well-being of these families and improve the overall performance and readiness of service members.

- **Postvention Programs for Suicide Bereavement:** Our advocacy extends to the development and implementation of co-designed postvention programs, offering specialised support to families affected by suicide, recognising its profound and distinct impact.
- **Extended Support through Ex-service Organisations (ESOs):** We are actively engaging with ESOs to expand their support services to a wider range of family members, including parents and families of deceased Australian Defence Force personnel, ensuring they remain connected and supported.

Achievements to Date:

- *Robe2Recovery Initiative: Immediate support is now available for bereaved parents in South Australia, with efforts underway to raise awareness through the Veterans Advisory Council Meeting.*
- *RSL LifeCare’s Commitment: In New South Wales, RSL LifeCare is exploring ways to extend their support to bereaved parents, reviewing program suitability and implementation strategies.*
- *Families of Veteran’s Guild (previously AWW NSW/ACT): Committed to providing social connection and support for bereaved parents, enhancing their wellbeing and community integration.*

Commemorative Achievements and Policy Advancements

- **Sufferings of War and Service Recognition:** A culmination of efforts led to the establishment of the Suffering of War and Service Committee, which led to the commissioning of the ‘For Every Drop Shed in Anguish’ sculpture at the Australian War Memorial, which will be unveiled on 22 February 2024. This achievement marks a significant milestone in acknowledging and commemorating the sacrifices and enduring impact of war and service members and their families.
- **Roll of Honour and Reflection Services Advocacy:** Advocating for the Australian War Memorial to update the Roll of Honour criteria to reflect contemporary understandings and research of service-related deaths.
- **Annual Last Post and Reflection Service:** Advocating and engaging with the Australian War Memorial Council to consider making the ‘Last Post and A Time of Reflection Service’ an annual event to honour the sacrifices and services of all those connected to the defence community, across all wars, conflicts, and peacekeeping operations.

Transformative Advocacy and Royal Commission Involvement

- **Impactful Royal Commission Representation:**
 - *In February 2022 appeared, sharing personal insights and reflections. Not just a narrative of personal experiences but a strategic advocacy approach effort that culminated in 16 transformative recommendations. These proposals, meticulously crafted to address systemic gaps, were submitted to the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) and Defence, signifying a pivotal move towards meaningful change. Some of these recommendations are now on a promising path toward implementation, evidencing the impact of advocacy in action.*

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- *Appeared as the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, August 2023. Testifying before such an important body not only highlights the significant challenges faced by veteran families but also plays a crucial role in shaping policies and support systems aimed at improving their lives. The actionable steps you proposed are vital for ensuring that veteran families receive the recognition and support they deserve.*
- **Roundtable Leadership and Policy Influence:** Continuing commitment to amplifying the voices of those touched by tragedy led to the organisation of pivotal roundtables with widows and bereaved parents. These forums were not merely discussions; they were powerful platforms for influencing the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference, ensuring that the experiences and needs of these families were central to our collective quest for justice and support.
- **Family Impact Statement Campaign:** Through our dedicated advocacy, we successfully campaigned for the mandatory inclusion of family impact statements in all Repatriation Commission (RC) and Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission (MRCC) submissions. This policy change highlights our commitment to prioritising the welfare of veteran families, ensuring their perspectives are integral to decision-making. It provides authentic insights and feedback, crucial for tailoring programs and policies to meet the needs and challenges faced by veterans and their families.

Advocacy and Achievements in Family Policy Resourcing and Direction

Advocacy for Inclusion and Recognition

- **Veteran Families in DVA Corporate Plan:** Successfully advocated for the inclusion of veteran families in the DVA [2023-24 Corporate Plan \(DVA Corporate Plan on a page\)](#) ensuring they are recognised as distinct clients. This enhances their visibility and the support they receive, addressing the unique challenges and needs of veteran families that were previously overlooked.
- **Security and Safety in Wellbeing Framework:** Influenced the DVA to maintain 'Security and Safety' within its Wellbeing Framework, reinforcing these crucial elements in veteran support strategies. This ensures that the safety and security of veteran families remain a top priority in policy decisions ([2023-24 Corporate Plan](#)).

Strategic Leadership in Family and Domestic Violence Initiatives

- **DVA Family and Domestic Violence Strategy:** Played a key role in implementing DVA's [Family and Domestic Violence Strategy 2020-25](#), focusing on comprehensive support for affected individuals. This strategy aims to provide targeted assistance and resources to veteran families experiencing domestic violence, addressing the specific dynamics and stressors of military life.
- **National Action Plan Inclusion:** Successfully advocated for the inclusion of 'Military and Veteran Families' as a distinct group in the [National Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032](#). This ensures that the unique experiences of these families are considered in national policies, leading to more effective and tailored interventions.
- **Consultation Contributions:** Successfully facilitated the inclusion of additional insights from veteran families during the National Action Plan consultation, enriching the dialogue with lived experiences. This input is crucial for developing policies that accurately reflect the needs and challenges faced by veteran families.

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- **National Women’s Safety Summit:** Represented veteran families at the 2021 National Women’s Safety Summit, influencing national discussions and subsequent activities addressing family and domestic violence. This ensured that the voices of veteran families were heard and considered in shaping national safety policies.
- **STOP Domestic Violence Conference:** Successfully highlighted the unique challenges of veteran families at the STOP Domestic Violence conference in December 2022, aiding mainstream service providers in offering targeted assistance. This helps service providers understand and address the specific needs of veteran families.

Community Collaboration and Education

- **Community of Practice Engagement:** Actively participated in a cross-community Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Community of Practice, advocating for coordinated responses to violence and integrating military family experiences into broader sector strategies. This collaboration aims to ensure that veteran families receive comprehensive and cohesive support.
- **Partnership with 1800 Respect:** Collaborated with 1800 Respect to train service providers on the unique dynamics within military and veteran families, promoting nuanced support approaches. This training helps service providers deliver more effective and empathetic care to veteran families.

Raising Awareness and Support for Veteran Families

- **National Surveys and Research:** Instrumental in integrating military/veteran indicators in national surveys, enhancing the understanding of violence impacts within these communities. This research is vital for developing informed policies and interventions.
- **Awareness and Guidance:** We regularly share vital information on family, domestic, and intimate partner violence with the veteran family community. This outreach aims to raise awareness and guide individuals toward essential support services, ensuring veteran families know what resources are available and how to access them.
- **Webinar Participation:** On May 16, 2024, I presented at the Hills Community Aid Domestic Violence Awareness Event to support those affected by domestic violence. On May 20, 2024, I had the privilege of joining Dr. Sean Cowlshaw for a powerful webinar with the Families of Veterans Guild during Domestic Violence Prevention Month. Dr. Cowlshaw broke down the complexities of intimate partner violence and family domestic violence within Defence and DVA contexts, clarifying key definitions and assumptions. I shared lived experiences and eye-opening statistics, highlighting the impact of intimate partner violence.

Research and Policy Influence

- I strongly endorse, support, and am actively participate in a groundbreaking \$2 million ANROWS and DVA-funded project led by Monash University. This initiative aims to significantly improve data collection and develop robust strategies to reduce family and domestic violence within military veteran families.

Expansion of Family Policy Resources

- **Growth of DVA’s Family Policy Team:** Successfully lobbied for the expansion of DVA’s Family Policy Team from 1.5 full-time equivalents to a robust team of 8, focused on developing and enhancing policies and support services for veteran families. This expansion allows for more comprehensive and specialised support.

Employment and Education Initiatives

- **Prime Minister’s Employment Awards:** Advocated for the inclusion of 'Partner Employee' and 'Partner Entrepreneur of the Year' categories in the Prime Minister’s Employment Awards, recognising significant contributions of ADF partners. This acknowledgment helps highlight the valuable role that partners play in the workforce.
- **Employment Pilots and Pathways:** Support and promote employment pilots and pathways for Defence partners and veteran families, particularly in Townsville, facilitating meaningful employment opportunities. These initiatives help address the employment challenges often faced by veteran families.
- **Education and Employment Programs:** Actively advocate(d) for the creation of education and employment programs tailored to veteran families, achieving tangible progress in program development and implementation. These programs aim to provide veteran families with the skills and opportunities needed for successful careers.
- **Streamlined Education Schemes:** Streamlined access to Education Schemes, ensuring comprehensive support in education and career training for children of veteran families. This helps children of veterans achieve their full potential.

Legislative Advocacy Initiatives and Achievements

Legislative Proposals and Key Recommendations

- **Including Families in the Legislation:** Incorporating families into legislation requires a clear, modern definition of who qualifies as a veteran's family. While 'Wholly Dependent Partner' has been used for War Widows under the MRCA, we recommend 'Bereaved Family Member' for its clarity and inclusivity. Community discussions revealed that referring to a partner as wholly or partly dependent is outdated and offensive. Feedback strongly favours 'bereaved family' as future terminology, even though the older generation of veteran families still strongly prefers 'widow(er).' Embracing 'Bereaved Family Member' aligns with modern family dynamics and diverse compositions, making it more acceptable to younger partners and ensuring our language is both gender-neutral and relevant.
- **Removing Privacy Barriers:** Empowering families to be more involved in supporting veterans is critical to the health and well-being of veterans and families. We propose streamlining and simplifying the authority-to-act processes, making it easier for families to step in, especially when veterans are in crisis. This change will ensure families can provide timely and effective support without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.
- **Fair Funeral Entitlements:** Ensuring all bereaved families get fair support is essential. The inequities in funeral entitlements arise from several provisions in the amendments. The varying eligibility criteria, pension status differences, capped amounts, and administrative hurdles create unequal support for families of deceased members, resulting in financial and procedural challenges.
- **Care for Children:** Providing long-term mental health and well-being support for children of veterans is crucial. Children of veterans may require mental health and well-being support throughout their lifetime due to the impacts of service or their parent's mental health challenges. Support provisions should be reviewed, assessed, and adequately supported.
- **Flexible and Adequate Domestic Assistance:** Providing practical supports to help veteran families live independently and remain in their homes longer while ensuring benefits keep up with rising living costs. This assistance helps families maintain their independence and quality of life.

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- **Family Engagement in Transition Support:** Including families in transition support provisions is vital to enhancing their role in the veteran's journey. This ensures that families are supported during the transition to civilian life.
- **Reflecting Community Expectations:** It is essential to use modern language and meet current community expectations for diversity and inclusion in care and support provisions. By adopting language that reflects diverse family structures and compositions, we can ensure our support systems are inclusive and relevant to all families. This approach respects the evolving dynamics of today's families and fosters a more welcoming and supportive environment for everyone.
- **Extended Coverage for Service-Related Diseases:** Including deaths due to service-related diseases treated during service is crucial. This ensures that families receive support when a veteran's death is linked to their service.
- **Recognition and Support for Carers:** Carers play a vital role in supporting veterans and deserve recognition and enhanced provisions. Veterans can face health issues that require long-term care, and current mainstream services do not adequately address the unique challenges faced by veteran carers. Carers often end up with their own health issues unattended due to their caregiving responsibilities. By improving provisions for these dedicated individuals, we can ensure they receive the support they need and deserve while continuing to care for our veterans. Currently, many of these carers receive the Gold Card after their veteran has died. Providing medical care for carers who cannot work due to caregiving responsibilities of veterans who are Gold Card holders throughout the veteran's lifetime, instead of only once the veteran has died, would be sensible and beneficial.
- **Extension of the ADF Family Health Scheme:** We propose extending the ADF Family Health Scheme to include the families of veterans who are Gold Card holders. Currently, there are significant gaps in the service, leaving these families without essential benefits like stable employment, housing, and healthcare. Families, particularly those with special needs children and spouses, face challenges that are not adequately addressed under the current and mainstream systems. By expanding the scheme to veteran families, we can ensure these families receive the comprehensive support they need and deserve, helping them maintain their well-being and stability.

Legislative and Commission Achievements

- **Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act:** Successfully contributed to revising eligibility rules under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004, expanding benefits for children of veterans in education. This ensures that children of veterans receive the support they need for their education.
- **Acute Support Package:** Played a pivotal role in introducing and expanding the Defence, Veterans, and Families' Acute Support Package, ensuring immediate and essential assistance to veteran families in crisis. Addressed concerns about its administration by advocating for clearer information, developing communications products, and planning workshops with stakeholders. Expanded the package to include children in the full-time care of grandparents.
- **Family Impact Statement:** Successfully advocated for a mandatory family impact statement in all Repatriation Commission and MRCC submissions, ensuring family considerations are integral to policy development. This ensures that policies are developed with a comprehensive understanding of their impact on families.

Advocacy and Achievements in Building Partnerships and Enhancing Community Awareness

Strategic Partnerships for Veteran Family Awareness

- **Proactive Partnership with FDV Commissioner:** Proactively partnered with the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Commissioner regularly to advocate for the recognition of veteran families' unique challenges. This collaboration is pivotal in equipping civilian services to better support veteran families, showcasing our commitment to fostering understanding and providing comprehensive support.
- **Influencing National Policy:** Held regular discussions with the Prime Minister's Advisor for Suicide Prevention, ensuring that the needs of veterans and their families are integral to government programs and services. This strategic engagement demonstrates our dedication to influencing policy for the betterment of veteran families now and in the future.
- **Expanding Reach and Engagement:** Since assuming my role, I have continued to travel across the country, engaging with veterans, their families, and Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs). These extensive visits are not just about being present but about actively listening and gathering invaluable feedback. By understanding the real experiences and needs of veteran families firsthand, I can advocate more effectively for better systems and support. This direct engagement ensures their voices are powerfully represented in policy discussions, driving meaningful change for our veteran community.
- **Empowering Ex-Service Organisations:** Consistently advised ESOs on enhancing support and inclusivity for families, reinforcing the veteran support ecosystem. This advice helps ESOs provide better services to veteran families.
- **Strengthening State-Level Collaborations:** Engaged regularly with the NSW Veteran Affairs Director and the NSW Women's Safety Commissioner. These partnerships are instrumental in sharing insights, collaborating on initiatives, and advocating for veteran families' needs, ensuring a holistic approach to support and awareness.

Consultative Achievements and Co-Design Efforts

- **Family Strategy Development and Action Plan Advocacy:** Initiated the creation of the inaugural Family Strategy to recognise and support the contributions of veterans' families, setting a clear direction for comprehensive support. As part of this effort, we successfully advocated for and contributed to the development of an Action Plan under the Defence and Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy. Additionally, we strongly pushed for an Outcomes framework to be integrated into the plan. This framework will ensure that every action is purposeful, measurable, and impactful, providing a clear roadmap for enhancing the well-being of veteran families and ensuring their needs are met through concrete actions.
- **Cross-Functional Working Group Establishment:** Founded a DVA working group encompassing policy, service delivery, and commemorations to unify efforts in supporting veteran families, demonstrating a collaborative and inclusive approach to family support and service provision.
- **Family-Centric Engagement:** Led initiatives to embed the consideration of veteran families' perspectives within DVA, from staff engagement sessions to advising senior leadership. This has fostered a culture of inclusivity and awareness, ensuring that veteran families' needs are at the forefront of decision-making processes.

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- **Policy Influence and Recommendations:** Identified service gaps for vulnerable groups within the veteran community, including children, carers, and survivors of family and domestic violence. Through targeted policy recommendations and input into new proposals, our efforts are geared towards closing these gaps and enhancing support for those most in need.

These accomplishments highlight our unwavering dedication to advocating for veteran families, fostering strategic partnerships, and driving meaningful change through consultative and co-design efforts. Our work not only raises awareness but also ensures that veteran families are supported, included, and recognised across all levels of government and society.