



A word from Gwen



Welcome to the first snapshot of the Veteran Family Advocate work that is underway. I began by deepening my understanding of how DVA functions – looking at the policies, procedures, services, legislation and programs. I have also been working to strengthen my relationships within DVA, Defence, State and Territory counterparts, and our Ex-Service Organisations. These relationships are key to connecting the experiences of our families with those who can enact change and better support families.

Since the COVID-19 restrictions in Australia have eased, I have commenced a tour of Australia in earnest. I am so pleased to get the opportunity to meet with many members of the defence and veteran communities and the organisations that work tirelessly to support them. You can see some early insights I have gathered from the visits so far in this snapshot, and I look forward to sharing more with you as I get to each area.

In the wake of the recent announcement of a Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide I actively engaged with families to contribute to the Terms of Reference. I know it will take time for the Royal Commission to make recommendations and affect change. In the meantime, I will continue my work collecting information, stories and experiences to influence change and ensure families are connected to services. Thank you to everyone that I have had a chance to talk with so far. I look forward to engaging with many more and I am keen to see the impact our efforts make over the next several years!

ANZAC Day 2021

ANZAC Day 2021 was spent with the 3RAR community in Townsville – where my son is posted. I also had the opportunity to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the Battle of Kapyong Day on 24 April.

DVA’s Family Strategy

The first Family Strategy will define DVA’s commitment to recognising the contribution of veterans’ families and provide a framework for DVA’s role in supporting them. This living strategy will help set the direction, goals and performance outcomes for increasing awareness and action for families.

Future Commissions Submissions

There is now a mandatory requirement to include a family impact statement in all future Commission Submissions, outlining the impact the policy, program or process will have on families.

Open Arms – Regional Community Engagements

A series of engagements have been conducted across Australia with the Open Arms team, peers and regional ESOs to collect experiences, insights and ideas from veterans and families about the Open Arms current and future offerings.

DVA’s Family and Domestic Violence Strategy

The DVA Family and Domestic Violence Strategy that aligns with the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children has been released and is being implemented. The next National Plan to the Women’s Safety team in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet is also being developed.

Parents Considered by ESOs

ESO’s have an opportunity to include parents in their provision of services and in their definition of family. Working to create links for parents to ESO services and programs ensures we better support our veterans and parents receive the support to they need as well.

Veteran Suicide Symposium

Consulting regularly with the interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention culminated in sharing my lived-experiences and insights at the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Symposium in March 2021. [Symposium – Video 3: Gwen Cherne, Veteran and Family Response](#)

Speeches and Events

Presented at and participated in panels and events for organisations such as Inspector-General ADF Workshop, Canberra Rotary, Australian Trade and Investment Commission, Commando Welfare Trust. Attended more than 100 meetings and roundtables with National and State and Territory Government entities, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, the Governor General, DVA, the Australian Defence Force, Commonwealth State and Territory Governments, Open Arms, Defence Families Australia and ex-service organisations.

Key statistics

Families represented in over **18** different forums and committees
Visited **ACT, NSW, QLD, SA, WA, and NT**
Appeared over **84** times across different media platforms for interviews, articles and radio.

What have I heard from our State and Territory visits so far

Western Australia visit

- Campbell Barracks visit in October 2020.
- Families asked for a continuation of Chaplaincy support following transition – now a project led by Australian Army padre Rob Sutherland
 - The impacts of the Inspector General’s Afghanistan ADF inquiry will likely endure for veterans and families for sometime, we should look to:
 - prioritise health care and claims for those impacted
 - draft policy proposals to support those who have experienced moral injury or moral trauma
 - implement proactive public information regarding welfare, legal and administrative support.

Northern Territory visit

- The Darwin DVA office, Larrakeyah Barracks, RAAF Darwin and Robertson Barracks visits in March 2021.
- Veteran Support Officers (VSO) requested more information about the entitlements and supports available for partners and families to encourage early engagement – pilot VSO Cheat Sheet now in development.
 - Families experience difficulty obtaining necessary specialists and support especially for children with special needs. Financial support from ADF for travel is adversely impacting Family Tax Benefits.
 - Limited childcare adversely affects partner employment opportunities.

South Australia visit

- Adelaide DVA office, local ESOs and the Opening of the Repat Veteran Wellbeing Centre within the Daw Park Repatriation Health Precinct visits in Adelaide in April 2021.
- ESO’s are concerned that they cannot connect with families who need their services, specifically when there has been a veteran death.
 - Aging carers raised concerns around the secondary impacts of veterans physical health and mental health issues on the carers’ financial, mental and physical health.
 - Support for veterans who have experienced abuse.
 - Support for children needs to be further developed.

Townsville visit

- Lavarack Barracks and the OASIS Wellbeing Centre visits in Townsville in April 2021.
- Success and opportunities for further engagement of Open Arms Peer Workers.
 - Understanding better what services exist for veterans and families (OASIS).
 - Concerns around zero tolerance policies in Defence and the impact on veterans and families.
 - Concerns around proactive family engagement in transition processes.