



A word from Gwen



Welcome to the second snapshot of the Veteran Family Advocate work underway. It has been a very busy number of weeks since the 19 April 2021 announcement of a Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicides. I was interviewed by the ABC later that day to talk about the announcement.

<https://media.streem.com.au/player/ZJNgsn>

Everything we do in supporting the Royal Commission must be focused on creating the change, hope and healing for our veteran and family communities. This is an opportunity to ensure our veterans and families are listened to, heard and that even further action is taken to reduce the instances of suicide in our community and the impacts these struggles have on families.

Learning about and re-living traumas veterans and families have experienced through a Royal Commission may be triggering for many in our community. Self-care, connection, peer support and mateship is important as ever. It is essential that veterans and families know what services are available to them and are connected to them. Working on raising awareness and overcoming obstacles to care is an area of work I have been and will continue to focus on. Please take care of yourselves and keep checking in on your mates in the months to come.

Strategic Plan 2021-22

I have identified five priorities for my strategic plan and priorities for the 2021-22 financial year:

- 1 Build Community Awareness
- 2 Suicide Prevention and Postvention
- 3 Family Policy Resourcing and Direction
- 4 Identify and Address Concerns around Transition
- 5 Increase Data and Research Holdings

Success is about ensuring a systems approach to veteran support – they are a part of a family and not a singular entity. We need to understand how military life affects the whole community, and build awareness of support, gaps, experiences and needs. We need to provide that support in flexible way that allows the veteran and their family to lead the process. Please [reach out to my team](#) if you would like to contribute to my priorities.

Royal Commission Terms of Reference workshops

On 29 April 2021 I hosted two workshops with families, exploring the draft terms of reference for the recently announced Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, and specifically what our families who have been vocal in their support for a Royal Commission want to see occur.

Common themes

- **Systemic focus**
Need to be broader and more systemic; Need for a deep and systemic examination.
- **Accountability**–
Need to include action on suspected criminal activity; Individual accountability and criminal charges in scope.
- **Definition of families**
Include a broad definition of families (parents, siblings, spouses, children).

Parents workshop themes

- Specify a **focus on DVA** processes.
- Concerns regarding the **consultation process**.
- Should not continue with **National Commissioner**.
- Increased **specificity** to ensure key areas are not missed (e.g. use of pharmaceuticals within Defence, medical processes, rates paid to health providers)

Widows and Partners workshop themes

- Positivity of a future focus.
- The importance of lived experience – sharing and safe spaces.
 - Availability and access to mental health resources.
 - Inclusive of financial drivers of suicide.

“the individual that gets to that dark place isn’t there by choice”

A personal thank you – Thank you to everyone who was involved in these workshops. The grief in the room was palpable on the day. We had so many families sharing such intimate and traumatic experiences with us. To make a real change we need the help of these families with lived experiences, and we will continue to work with them and many others into the future.

What else has been going on?

ESO Training

Open Arms is creating and implementing a crisis management and welfare officer training for ESOs to ensure we are better protecting those who are supporting veterans and families out in our communities.

Open Arms National Advisory Council (NAC)

On 30 April 2021 I briefed the NAC about my role, the consultation I have been undertaking and themes that I have been hearing from our community. This council meets three times a year and provides the Minister with independent advice on the needs of the veteran community and how these needs might be address through the Open Arms.

An interview with Gwen

On 11 May 2021 my interview with the award winning journalist Glenn Daniel as a part of his podcast series “[The Worst Day of Your Life](#)” was aired. Through safely sharing our lived-experience, we can break the stigma around mental health and provide hope and healing to our community and beyond.