



Australian Government

The Repatriation Commission

Veteran Family Advocate

SNAPSHOT

Issue 1 - Jan – Jun 2023



A WORD FROM GWEN

This year I have travelled some 22,000 kilometres approximately across the country, meeting with veterans and families. Between myself and my advisor in the past six months, we have travelled to six states, spending many hours in direct engagements with numerous stakeholders and veteran families. During our visits we have heard many stories and journeys which have informed me and me to be able to drive a wide range of initiatives and advocacy topics for our community with many organisations including National, State and Territory governments, service providers, ex-service organisations, Defence and DVA. As part of this some of the key bodies of work include the Defence and Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy (2023-2027), the National Action Plan that will sit under the strategy, bereavement programs and services for families – especially for bereaved parents, family and domestic violence, suicide prevention, partner employment, youth mental health and education initiatives.

This snapshot covers the last six months of my work. A comprehensive list of my achievements over the last three years in this role and a VFA webpage will be launched soon. I hope the webpage will better assist veteran families in following our travels, successes and initiatives we are working on.

If you have pressing issues you want added to our list of matters for which we are advocating, please let us know. Or, if you want to be a part of the Action Plan consultations, please let us know by sending your name, organisation you represent (if any) and preferred location to vfa@dva.gov.au and we will include you in our future engagements.



ANZAC DAY 2023

Like many on Anzac Day, I braved the cold Canberra morning to attend the Anzac Day Dawn Service at the Australian War Memorial with my beautiful children.

For me and my family, Anzac Day is a time to reflect and remember Pete. We remember all the beautiful parts of him; the sweet and funny moments; his generous heart that drove him to try to make a positive change in the world through his service. And, I remember the cost his service carried.

Thank you to those who shared some of Pete's childhood, 3RAR and 2CDO stories with me. I can't tell you how much it means to hear others say a loved one's name and remember them fondly and with love.

I know many people feel a range of emotions on Anzac Day. Whether you attended a service or commemorated it some other way, I hope you found a moment to honour and reflect on all the Australian men and women who stood up to serve our nation in times of war and peace – and the families who proudly stood beside them.

Lest we Forget



ADVOCACY UNDERWAY

- Advocating for a **Defence and veteran family indicator on education enrollment forms in all states and territories** in line with South Australia. The inclusion of a tick box is key to levelling the playing field for children who are disadvantaged because of their parents' service and the transient lifestyle veteran families are often required to live.
- Advocating for Ex-service Organisations to **extend their support and provisions for services to parents, specifically those of deceased veterans and widows(ers) who re-partner** so they do not lose access to support. There currently is little to no support for veteran mothers and fathers, grandparents and siblings, who need support, healing and social inclusion. I am pleased to be able to advise that there is some early progress in this area; Robe2Recovery SA and War Widows NSW are able to provide support to parents now.

FEATURED ACHIEVEMENTS

- Established a nationally consistent streamlined, holistic and **strategic oversight of the Education Schemes** - improving governance, timeliness and effectiveness of support to families accessing the Schemes. Families can access financial assistance, student support services, tuition, guidance and counselling for eligible children to help achieve their full potential in full-time education or career training.
- In February of 2022 Commissions made a change to the eligibility rules for children of veterans under the **Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004**. This change was made to ensure continued access to the Gold Card for children who were, or intended to remain in full time education, but are unable to study full-time because of a diagnosis for mental illness or injury by medical practitioner.
- I was involved in the development and expansion of the **Defence Veterans' and Families Acute Support Package Bill 2022**. This package expands the services available to veterans' families in times of crisis, and gives them greater choice in how they use those services.

ENGAGEMENTS

- Since commencing my role, I have met more than **20,500** individuals and organisations within the community. Attended approximately **1,600** meetings, and responded to hundreds of letters emails and phone calls from stakeholders and veteran families.

STATE AND TERRITORY VISITS

Darwin

On 16 February I kicked off my first State and Territory visits of the year with Darwin. I was fortunate to meet a number of veterans and veteran families; members of the Northern Territory parliament including, the Hon Paul Kirby, Minister for Veterans' Affairs; Lia Finocchiaro MLA, Leader of the Opposition; and Marie-Clare Boothby MLA, Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs.



Whilst my visit was short, I had the opportunity to discuss with Minister Kirby the unique demographic challenges their Government faces, and gain support for the wellbeing outcomes for veteran families. I also attended a community engagement session at the Veteran and Families' Hub at Satepak House, which was put on with the help of Mates4Mates. Approximately 50 current and former serving veterans and veteran families, Ex-Service Organisations representatives, interested community members (medical professionals) and Members of the Northern Territory Parliament came along to discuss 'The Defence and Veteran Family Support Strategy', and put forward tangible objectives for the Action Plan.

Melbourne

In March I travelled to Melbourne to take part in BAE Systems Australia Family Employment panel at the Australian International Avalon Airshow 2023. The last time I went to an Airshow was with my Dad a little over 30 years ago! It was amazing to bring back some of those great memories and see the technology on display.

The BAE Systems Australia Family Employment panel was a good opportunity for me to talk about veteran family employment and pathways for careers alongside other panel members and employers who were dedicated to getting it right for veterans and veteran families.

Following the Airshow, I squeezed in a Community Engagement session. Overall, the discussion focussed on how veterans and veteran families may benefit from a range of services and programs that address their unique needs and challenges. During these discussions I was struck by a comment Abbey (widow) made. She put the problem so succinctly, "If you don't see yourself as part of this community, you won't feel like you can stand up and fight for your needs". In order to have a successful outcome we have to work against the idea that families aren't part of our veteran community. Families play a crucial role in supporting veterans and they are also impacted by service.

Adelaide

Adelaide saw me tick over my third state visit and Community Engagement of the year. The two days I spent in Adelaide were jammed packed with meetings, including one with the Hon Geoff Brock MP, South Australian Minister for Veterans Affairs. I also met with several bereaved families. While sometimes challenging, it was valuable to listen to what issues these families are experiencing.

Ahead of my Community Engagement at the Repatriation Veterans Hub, I had a chance to walkthrough their facilities and meet the tenants who are doing a fabulous job supporting and connecting veterans with the services they need. The Veterans and Families' Hubs are a fantastic resource for our community, offering assistance to gain access to education, healthcare, advice on financial matters and much more. I strongly encourage our veterans and families in Adelaide (and where other centres are based) to drop in and see what services are on offer.

On 23 March I got to attend the official unveiling of the new Legacy Club of South Australia and Broken Hill at the Torrens Parade Ground. It was great to see so many people in attendance and I enjoyed the chance to chat and catch up with those who came along. The office will bring a new dynamic to the club, which will support the South Australian and Broken Hill veteran communities.



SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Australian Veterans' Brain Bank

On 23 January 2023 the National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare launched the Australian Veterans' Brain Bank. A NSW Government initiative, the Australian Veterans' Brain Bank is a collaboration between Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's Neuropathology Department and the National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare based at Concord Hospital in Sydney. It will focus on understanding the long-term effects of head trauma among veterans. It will also improve the diagnosis and treatment of brain disease during life. This is a welcome and long-awaited initiative for the Australian Defence Force, the broader veteran community and so many families who are looking for solutions to better support veterans living with invisible and poorly understood scars. Please consider getting involved. The more we know, the better preventative treatments and measures we can find. Find out more visit: www.veteransbrainbank.org.au

Avalon Airshow 2023 – Family Employment Panel



At the beginning of March I took part in the Australian International Avalon Airshow 2023 Family Employment Panel hosted by BAE Systems Australia. It was a good opportunity to discuss veteran family employment pathways

for families of current and former ADF members and how they can build a career in Australia's Defence industry. I know how challenging it can be for partners of ADF personnel to establish their own careers. There are always challenges when it comes to finding flexibility, juggling family, work and service commitments. BAE Systems Australia is leading the way in partnerships with organisations like 'With You With Me and Right Management'.

Legacy's Unveiling of Torrens Parade Ground Office

I was delighted to be at the Torrens Parade Ground in Adelaide to see the unveiling of Legacy's new office on 23 March 2023. The new office is ready to provide a safe place for families to meet and explore what supports and services they can provide.

Legacy's, legacy over the past 100 years has been the steadfast commitment to support and better the lives of families of veterans. Legacy has grown and changed over the years to support partners, and children of veterans, including some 43,000 widows, children and dependents across Australia.



The event also marked 50 days until the beginning of the Legacy Centenary Torch Relay. The relay began in Pozières, France, prior to Anzac Day and journeyed to London before making its way to Australia. Around 1,500 torch bearers will be part of this special event carrying the torch to 100 official stops across Europe and Australia. I am enjoying keeping track of the torch relay as it travels around Australia.



Richard Wiesel Exhibition – 'Service'

In March, my family and I had the chance to be part of Richard Wiesel Exhibition 'Service', a series of photographic portraits and video interviews which will highlight the impact service has on our veterans and the families that support them. Richard has assembled a great slate of veterans and families to tell their stories.



Using his beautiful photographs to inspire people, start conversations, change opinions and make people think and about what they see. A national exhibition including galleries and museums is planned around the images as well as a coffee book. Please keep an eye out for this moving and immersive exhibition.

SERVICE

WHO AM I

My name is Richard Wiesel and I am a photographer of the human condition.

A storyteller and observer, using a camera as my language and grammar. I am a minimalist when it comes to my images, and I'm always, asking, how can I make the image that I am about to take cleaner, simpler, devoid of any distractions or visual anarchy? What can my image tell us about the person sitting in front of my camera? Who are they? What are they saying to us and what can we learn from their experience?

As a storyteller, I honestly care about the people that I am photographing. I'm curious and present, wanting to know more about them, and by engaging in conversation with the people that I am photographing, a conversation between us develops, and what happens is then, together - photographer and subject, we end up cooperating in creating, both, moving and revealing images.

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SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Combined Schools Anzac Service

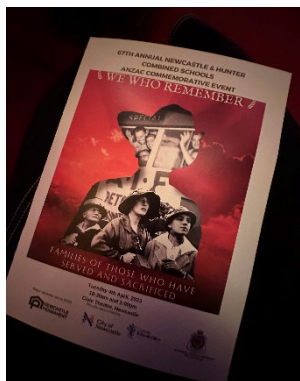
On 4 April 2023, I had the privilege of attending the Newcastle and Hunter Combined Schools Anzac Service. It was one of the most powerful commemorative events I have ever attended. The unique Anzac service involved thousands of



Newcastle Hunter Region students from public, Catholic and independent schools. This year's event focused on the impact war has on the families of those who serve. It was the perfect combination of arts, commemoration, military and families. My congratulations to the students and the artistic director for such a moving event that not only paid respect and acknowledged those who have

served, but also the service and sacrifice of families.

“Families carry the weight without the recognition they deserve” – RSL NSW Sub-Branch President Phil Winney OAM. Thank you Phil for understanding the role families' play and the importance of recognition. These types of events should be done all over our nation to help our children better understand the relevance of commemoration.



Cor Infinitus Memorial Tree & Plaque Unveiling

On 17 April, I had the honour to be present for the Cor Infinitus memorial tree planting and plaque unveiling at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne.

Cor Infinitus is doing great work to memorialise those who have served Australia, and taken their own life. The organisation has established memorials around the country, all designed to spark a conversation around suicide and provide a message of support



for those who may be struggling. The memorials are a powerful reminder of the love families hold for one another, and that taking your own life is never the solution.

Field of Remembrance

Australian War Widows NSW held the Anzac Field of Remembrance service on 20 April at St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney. It was touching event that paid tribute to those who given their life in service to our nation.

Jenny Ware's reading of the 'The Silent Ranks', didn't leave a dry eye in the Cathedral. It reminded everyone in attendance that although the years have passed, the scars of war are still with us.

The poignant service gave widows of war and their families the opportunity to remember and honour the sacrifice made through war, and reflect on the impact it has for the families who bare an enormous burden for our nation.

A big thank you to everyone at Australian War Widows NSW for keeping the Anzac Field of Remembrance tradition alive for the last 71 years.



Last Post and A Time of Reflection Ceremony

I was honoured to lead the first 'A Time of Reflection' Ceremony at the Australian War Memorial. In the lead up to Anzac Day, the Australian War Memorial took time to focus on families.



The event was a culmination of planning and hard work by the Veterans & Families United by Defence Service, A Time of Reflection Committee in conjunction with the Australian War Memorial's Director and staff. Personal and moving accounts, stories of service, sacrifice, resilience and hope which captured the essence of the event.

Including a personal reading by my daughter Emily. She wrote her speech and delivered it with love and strength. I could not be prouder of how well she expressed herself, her experiences and her love for her father and family. Her brothers were there, and Lachlan and Emily also performed in the choir.

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Gallipoli Scholarships

It was fantastic to present the 2023 Gallipoli Scholarships. There were 35 scholarships awarded this year – a record number. The scholarships are awarded to descendants of Australian service personnel. It's a way to honour past service, while also looking toward a bright future.

The recipient's receiving the scholarships have already achieved so much, and I know they will go on to do great things. They will be the doctors, teachers, lawyers and scientists of the future. They will play an important role shaping the Australia of tomorrow, just as our veterans helped shape the Australia of today.



East Coast Defence Families Forum: North Bondi RSL

I was grateful to be asked to attend the Defence and Veteran Families Forum being hosted by Allegra Spender MP in conjunction with North Bondi RSL sub branch. This forum was also attended by Minister Thistlethwaite. It was great hear from local and families on the frontline about the issues they care about, and to better understand how we can advocate to the Federal Government on their behalf. The importance for those in government

to hear these stories directly cannot be stressed enough. Issues brought up

during the session included communication with families, partner employment, mental health support, culture, difficulty understanding and connecting to services available to families. Additionally, families feeling isolated from command, services and supports are still barriers Defence and veteran families face, and ones we need to continue to tackle.

It was also so great to see Aspasia, who now works for Defence Member and Family Support. Aspasia has been a huge part of my families' journey as a Defence and veteran family and we are better off for the support she has provided us. I know other families in our community are as well.



East Coast Defence Families Forum

Allegra Spender MP
Independent Member for
Wentworth

Matt Thistlethwaite MP
Assistant Minister for
Defence and Veterans Affairs

Gwen Chame
Veteran Family Advocate
Commissioner

**Sunday 7th May
11.30am-1.30pm**
North Bondi RSL

**NORTH BOND
RSL**

Allegra Spender MP
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR WENTWORTH

Soldier On Gala Ball

The Soldier On Sydney Gala Ball was such a special night. It was a privilege to deliver one of the keynote addresses and offer my thanks to everyone who volunteers and works for Soldier On.



It's remarkable to think that a little more than 10 years ago, Soldier On didn't exist. Today, it's hard to imagine our veteran community without them. More than 10,000 veterans and family members benefit from their support services. From mental and physical health, employment and education opportunities, through to creating social connection, their holistic approach to wellbeing makes a huge difference to so many people's lives.

The night was a celebration of all the fantastic work Soldier On does to support our veteran community. From creating strong connections through social gatherings, to helping people find work and improve their physical and mental health, Soldier On makes such a positive impact.

Organisations like Soldier On are working to change lives for the better.

Legacy Mother's Day Centenary Lunch



It was fantastic to attend and speak at the Legacy Sydney, Mother's Day Centenary Lunch in May. Some 300 widows came together at Crown Sydney to enjoy a lovely lunch and share each other's company.

A highlight of the event was meeting and speaking with so many generous people, including some wonderful centenarians, and hearing their stories.

I am so grateful for the work Legacy does each and every day. They make such a positive impact in so many people's lives, mine included. Legacy has supported us and so many other families through thick and thin. With Legacy, you are never alone, there is always a community ready to lend a hand.



WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN HAPPENING?

Veterans Legislation Reform

On 16 February 2023, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel, Matt Keogh, announced that the Government would consult with the veteran community about a proposed pathway to simplify the veterans' legislative framework.

The legislation underpinning the veterans' compensation system is complex, hard to navigate and has left people waiting for too long to get support. Veterans, veteran families and widows all have entitlements under the legislation.

The guiding principle of this work is to ensure that no one will lose any benefit they are already receiving when the new arrangements commence.

The proposal is to move to a single ongoing veterans' entitlement scheme and the core elements of the proposed framework:

This reform aims to address issues that arise from administering three Acts. A single ongoing Act will provide coverage for all future claims for compensation;

- A single Act system will remove the complexity and provide greater clarity and consistency around entitlements for veterans and their families
- Grand-parenting all existing arrangements for those already receiving payments under existing arrangements

There have been a series of consultative forums hosted by the Minister for Veteran Affairs, the Assistant Minister for Veteran Affairs and the Department of Veterans' Affairs that have taken place around Australia with various individuals and ex-service organisations. These forums, alongside webinars and written submissions, have given stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposal.

The Government is considering this proposal, and considering views before it decides on a way forward, no drafting on the legislation has begun at this stage.

Once drafting of legislation commences it will be subjected to standard Parliamentary process and further consultation on the draft legislation will occur.

If you would like to know more please visit – www.dva.gov.au/legislationconsultation2023

Military Rehabilitation and Compensation (Special Assistance) Instrument 2022

Earlier this year it was brought to my attention that it wasn't well known in our veteran community about the change the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission were able to make in February of 2022 to the eligibility rules for children of veterans under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004. The change was made to ensure continued access to the Gold Card for children who were, or intended to remain in full time education, but are unable to study because of a significant mental illness diagnosed by a medical practitioner.

This special assistance instrument enables assistance (assessed on a case-by-case bases and specific criteria) to support the dependants of members, former members and deceased members who would otherwise miss out on compensation or benefits due to mental illness or injury.

Children of veterans of any age can also access counselling support through Open Arms.

Mainstream arrangements, supports are also available for mental health treatment plans under Medicare

www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/mental-health-care-and-medicare.

If you would like to find out more about the eligibility rules you can contact your DVA Veteran Case Worker or 1800 Veteran.

Additional information about the actual instrument can be found at: www.legislation.gov.au/details/F2022L00233

([Military Rehabilitation and Compensation \(Special Assistance\) Instrument 2022](#)).

Royal Commission Update

In August 2022 the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide provided its Interim Report to the Australian Government. The interim Report makes 13 recommendations which fall within three key themes: improving the claims process, Royal Commission administration and access to information by loved ones.

The Government has implemented one of the recommendations already (recommendation 5 – Remove DVA's Average Staffing Level Cap), agreed to nine, agreed in principle to one and noted two others. Initiatives that respond to these recommendations have now been implemented and recommendation 11 (Embed trauma-informed practices for information access) is well progressed. There is now more support and education for individuals who seek access to information or records held by Defence and DVA.

Initiatives include the establishment of an [Information Access Unit](#) in Defence and DVA, which will serve as a single point of contact for information requests and provide dedicated support to applicants when needed. The IAU will change the way requests for personal records and information are managed and will support applicants to access information in a streamlined, consistent and trauma-informed way. The IAU is for current and ex-serving ADF members, families and representatives to request information from Defence.

The Royal Commission have recently published a fourth external research paper, Machine learning analysis of risk factors for progression from suicide ideation to suicide-related behaviours in contemporary Australian Defence Force members, on their website. This paper explores the use of machine learning to identify an increase in risk of suicide in serving and ex-serving Defence members. More research papers will be published over the life of the Royal Commission, in addition to the four papers that have already been published. More information can be found at [Research | Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide](#).

WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN HAPPENING?

The Australian Government is committed to improving the delivery of support and services to serving ADF members, veterans, families, and advocates. While significant progress has been made, they recognise that more work needs to be done.

Further information on the implementation of the Interim Report recommendations can be found on the [Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide Interim Report](#).

Should you or your family require support, please reach out to a [crisis service](#).

Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence

Earlier this year I shared what has been happening in the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence (FDSV) space for information, visibility and interest. Domestic violence can happen to anyone, but we know for families in the military community it is unique and complex issue. Families may feel isolated and unsure where to get help and information so I wanted to take this opportunity share some of the specific engagements and advocating I am undertaking in this space and some guidance, support and additional resources that may be helpful.

Veteran Family Advocate Work

- Overseeing the ongoing implementation of Department of Veteran Affairs' (DVA) inaugural Family and Domestic Violence Strategy 2020-25 as a member of the Strategy Implementation Group.
- Participating in a cross-community Family Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence Community of Practice, working towards a coordinated whole of community approach, focused on the elements unique to veteran families.
- Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner and the Community of Practice is working with 1800 Respect (support and counselling service) and DVA to help inform them about Defence and veteran families' experience of Family Domestic Violence.
- Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner and the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Commissioner meet regularly to raise awareness of the unique experiences and barriers faced by veteran families, so civilian services are better equipped to respond to veteran families. Also looking to work together and collaborate on ways to better support veteran families.

Support for Veterans and their Families

- **DVA** has Launched a dedicated webpage for [Family and Domestic Violence](#) (FDV) for veterans and veteran families. The intention of the page is to support clients (or any interested party) to identify FDV, and outline supports DVA offers in a simple digestible language consistent with trauma informed practice. It is also in keeping with crisis sensitivity, providing short succinct information and a quick exit option.
- **Open Arms** services include counselling for individuals, couples and families; group programs to enhance support; lived experience peer support (including family peers); after-hours telephone counselling; crisis accommodation; and mental health literacy training.
- A [crisis payment](#) is a non-taxable, one-off payment to financially assist people following a range of defined circumstances. To be eligible for a crisis payment from **DVA**, the person must be in receipt of or be eligible for a Service Pension, Income Support Supplement or Social Security Age Pension (paid by DVA). The Crisis Payment is designed to assist the person establish themselves in a new residence following extreme circumstances forcing departure from the home such as natural disasters, or, for a victim of domestic or family violence, to re-establish their current residence after the perpetrator of the violence has left or been removed from the home.
- Partners of veterans in receipt of the [Partner Service Pension](#) (PSP), who separate because of the veteran's abusive behaviour, may continue to receive the payment indefinitely. This was a commitment in the Fourth Action Plan - National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022, which extended eligibility to support more former partners experiencing family and domestic violence.
- In partnership with Veterans SA, the Office for Women have developed **three fact sheets** to help current or ex-serving ADF members experiencing abuse, FDSV and those who suspect it may be happening to someone they know. Each offers practical guidance, support and additional resources, such as how to start an important conversation about someone's wellbeing. South Australia's fact sheets are on the [Government of South Australian Office for Women](#) under the [safety and wellbeing](#), Family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) fact sheet for the military community heading.

If you don't already, please feel free to follow me on my social media platforms:



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