



# Veteran Family Advocate – Snapshot

## From the Office of the Veteran Family Advocate, Commissioner Gwen Cherne



### A word from Gwen

2022 was another massive year. There were moments of great sadness, pain and struggle, but also incredible moments of healing and inspiration. It seems we tried to fit three years into one! Last year the conversation truly began to shift and change for veteran families. Families are no longer an add on or an after thought. Programs and services are *beginning* to put families at the centre

and include us in conversations from the start.

As we know, it will take time for the Royal Commission to make recommendations for families. In the meantime, there is a lot of work going on to improve family support programs and services, including early intervention, prevention and postvention. I am working with a number of groups to ensure families are included in future initiatives. I am also advocating, collecting information, stories and experiences to influence change and ensure families are acknowledged and supported in our own right.

Families are in need of support before they are bereaved, but for many of those who have lost a veteran there is still too little support – especially for parents. **I am continuing my work with government, DVA and other organisations to ensure all those affected by a defence or veteran death receive grief and loss programs after the loss of a veteran.** My key priorities for 2023 include developing the Action Plan under the Defence and DVA Family Support Strategy, bereavement programs for families, and continuing work with the family and domestic violence sector. Thank you to all who work to ensure families are better supported now and into the future – it takes us all to make the difference that is needed. Looking forward to 2023!



ANZAC Day 2022



ANZAC DAY DAWN SERVICE 2022



I had the rare honour to commemorate ANZAC Day 2022 on top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge thanks to RSL LifeCare Ltd.

### Defence and DVA Family Support Strategy

The Government committed to develop the very first [Defence and Veteran Family Support Strategy](#), which builds on the work I initiated in 2020 to create a DVA Family Strategy. It will recognise the contribution of veteran families, define what currently exists for families and provide a framework for Defence and DVA’s role in supporting families now and into the future.

I led engagements with a broad range of families and the wider veteran community stakeholders and will do so again in the new year when we develop the Action Plan to sit underneath the strategy.

There is still time to have your say in the online survey: [https://dva.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6SfSmyzNMWE5guq](https://dva.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6SfSmyzNMWE5guq)

### Engagements

Since my appointment in this role two years ago, I have actively engaged with more than **16,000** veterans, veteran families and supporting organisations, including more than **1,340** meetings.

### Defence Veterans’ and Families Acute Support Package Bill

I was involved in the development and expansion of the Acute Support Package Bill which commenced on the 14th October 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.

Most importantly, this package empowers families to decide what support they need and when they need it. This is not a one size fits all. Every crisis is different and every family is unique. It is important to support more families during illness, big life events, or times of stress. This new package will help make things a little bit easier when life sends a crisis our way.

### Policy Team

In May, we were successful in advocating DVA to expand its’ Family Policy Team from 1.5 FTE to a dedicated team of 8 individuals who now focus solely on developing and improving policies, supports and services for families.

## Noteworthy Achievements from 2022

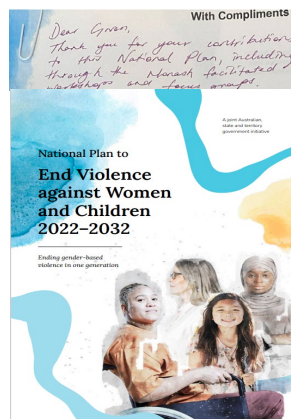
### Prime Minister’s National Veteran’s Employment Awards

Successfully advocated for two new categories to be included in the PM’s Employment Awards, ‘Partner Employee of the Year’ and ‘Partner Entrepreneur of the Year’. There are often barriers to veterans and family members finding rewarding work. Awards like these showcase the many skills in our community and the incredible value they bring to the employment sector. I could not be prouder to be part of acknowledging the great work of so many partners last year!



### National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children

Military and veteran families are included as a cohort in the National Plan for the first time ever! The National Plan is a comprehensive statement of the state of gender-based violence in this country, and what is needed to address it. This is a massive win for our community and will help with our future work in family, domestic and sexual violence. Our community experiences unique barriers to support and we need the sector to understand what those are and how to help veteran families overcome them.



### Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Community of Practice

I am part of the Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Community of Practice established in 2022. Veteran families need a coordinated, holistic approach designed to assist with pathways to practical supports and care that offer military-sensitive programs and help our families navigate systems. The Community of Practice established expectations that meaningful advances in prevention, response, and recovery from DFV are likely to require long-term strategies, education and training, principals for best practice and advancing knowledge and services available for veteran families.

### Education Schemes

Established streamlined, holistic and strategic oversight of the Education Schemes inline with today’s families and their needs. We created a nationally consistent approach, 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 them achieve their full potential in full-time education or career training. Find out if you or your family members qualify for DVA Education Schemes: [DVA Education Schemes](#) or [educationschemes@dva.gov.au](mailto:educationschemes@dva.gov.au) Thank you to all past individual State and Territory Board Members for your time and dedication to veteran families.





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## Significant Events

### Royal Commission Appearance

While I knew this process would be challenging, I had no idea how hard it would be. This ultimately was a healing process, but a painful one. I encourage other veteran families to make a submission before 13 October 2023.

### Student Veteran Impact Awards Gala Dinner

Australian Catholic University recognises the importance of education to successfully transition from military life. ACU offers specific programs and supports designed for veterans and veteran families. Programs like these dismantle employment barriers and provide career support to families opening up opportunities for veterans, partners, families, the ADF, employers and the whole community.



### Kokoda

I walked the Kokoda Track in November and spent Remembrance Day completing the final ascent. It was an amazing experience to see and feel part of what our WWII veterans did 80 years ago. It was also a personal journey to fulfil a promise and an opportunity for reflection and healing.



### Invictus Australia – Minister’s Invictus Sporting Challenge

The Invictus Games embodies the Anzac spirit of our veterans and their will to overcome injury and illness. It was a fantastic challenge to try some adaptive sports with Invictus Australia and a number of keen parliamentarians.



### 24th Annual Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defence Conference

An opportunity to co-present the work of the Repatriation Commission and DVA to Senior Enlisted Leaders and Chiefs of Defence Spouses. We made some important connections that will benefit our work and our community.

### Open Arms – Veterans and Family Counselling Regional Advisory Forum

Housing and homelessness for veterans and veteran families is a growing problem, especially in South East Queensland. All in attendance gained new insights and heard about the good work happening to support veterans and families in this area.

### Female Veterans & Families Forum

Veterans and families shared their lived experience in policy and program development and helped with prioritisation of new programs and services. As always it was great seeing the care and connection among participants.

### Nowra ESO Families Forum

Presented to the Nowra Families Forum, supported by the Veteran & Family Hub. I discussed my advocacy work to reduce gaps, improve services and supports, and reform the current system to better address the needs of today’s families.

### STOP the Domestic Violence Conference

Co-presented with Dr Sean Cowlshaw from Phoenix Australia. It was an opportunity to extend the knowledge of and connect with the Family and Domestic Violence sector. We discussed a recent research project and sought to increase the understanding of the unique barriers military and veteran families face in seeking support.

### Data and Insights

Worked with the veteran family community to generate **more than 200 questions** for the DVA Data and Insights Team regarding family issues. The team is currently working with the [Census](#) data and the [Multi-Agency Data Integration Project](#) (MADIP) data to answer these questions. This project will provide more accurate whole-of-life insights about veterans and veteran families and ensure government and service providers better understand veterans families.

## What else has been going on?

### Veteran & Family Hubs

Six of the sixteen Veteran and Family Hubs have been established across Australia in Perth, Townsville, Adelaide, Nowra, Wodonga and Darwin.

These hubs are a one-stop shop for local services which may include: physical and mental health services, wellbeing support, advocacy, employment, housing advice, and social connection.

The Hubs will deliver integrated support to families in partnership with ESOs, community and other organisations and state and territory governments.



### Family Employment Initiatives

There has been much growth in support for partner employment. Defence Families Australia, Soldier On, RSL Australia and RSL Queensland Employment Programs, Bravery Trust, The Prince’s Trust Australia, Wandering Warriors, the ADF’s Partner Employment Assistance Program, the Department of Workplace Relations Self-Employment Assistance program, Australian Catholic University and Wollongong University, Veteran Employer Commitment signatories such as Westpac, BHP and BAE Systems, and some state and territory government programs (e.g.: TAFE NSW Veteran Skills) now have programs for partners. One of the best first steps you can take is to get in touch with your local Veterans’ and Families’ Hub.

### Veteran Family Research

There is more and more research happening for Australian Veteran Families. I participate in a number of advisory boards, committees, consortiums and forums to represent veteran families, provide advice and contribute to the research. The following are just a few projects you may be interested in:

- ‘The Australian Military and Veterans’ Family Study’, through the Australian Institute of Family Studies and jointly funded by DVA and Defence. Due for release in early 2023, examines how the experiences and perspectives of the family inform or shape continued service in the ADF, and how family experiences of transition from service can be improved.
- Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA) is developing a ‘National Framework to support Families and Co-workers of Defence and Emergency Services Personnel who have died by suicide’, informed by lived experience.
- ‘Lessons Learned in Developing a Program for Children in Military and Emergency First Responder Families Experiencing Parental PTSD’ through University of Adelaide and Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA).
- ‘Understanding Encounters with Intimate Partner Violence among Australian Veterans and Families’ through Phoenix Australia.
- ‘Intimate Partner Violence among Current and Ex-serving Australian Defence Force Personnel and Families’ – Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme data analyses.
- ‘Veteran Intergenerational Trauma’ through Phoenix Australia.
- ‘Strengthening and Protecting Veteran Family Relationships’: Co-design of a Preventative Relationship Intervention’ through the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- ‘Moral Injury Study’ through Phoenix Australia.