

Australian Government

The Repatriation Commission
Veteran Family Advocate

SNAPSHOT

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A WORD FROM GWEN

What an eventful and productive six months it has been since my last update! I've traversed the country, engaging in numerous meetings and collaborative efforts with families, veterans, service providers and ex-service organisations

A significant highlight occurred on 31 August, when I appeared for the second time at the Royal Commission into the Defence and Veteran Suicide. I hope my contribution did justice to the issues facing Defence and veteran families.

I am thrilled to report that our webpage is now live! Visit the <u>webpage</u> to stay informed, explore the various activities, advocacy efforts and initiatives we are actively pursuing and my commitment to the veteran family community.

July marked the conclusion of Sandi Laaksonnen-Sherrin's tenure as the inagural Defence Family Advocate at Defence Families Australia. I want to acknowledge Sandi's significant contribution to strengthening support for Defence families. Sandi, you challenged all of us and always inspired me to persist. We wish you well in all future endeavours and your successor has big shoes to fill.

The events this year have been both enlightening and inspiring, reinforcing our collective commitment to the well-being of those who have served and those who have stood by them. I am so encouraged by the amount of work going on in our community. So many people all over our country are doing so much for veteran families. It is making a difference and I encourage you to keep going!

I am thrilled to share that my diary for the upcoming year is already filling up with exciting engagements. I look forward to continuing our discussions and work to enhance the lives of veterans and families.

As we approach the end of the year, I extend warm wishes for a merry and bright holiday season and a new year filled with peace and joy. I know this time of year can be challenging, so please take care of yourselves. May the spirit of the season bring light to you, your loved ones, and our entire veteran and family community. Here's to a new year full of continued collaboration and progress in the well-being of our veterans and veteran families.

Love and light, Gwen



50th Anniversary of the End of Australia's Involvement in the Vietnam War

I was honoured to attend the special commemorative service in Canberra marking 50 years since the end of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. As the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, this day holds important significance for me. Approximately two thousand veterans, family, ex-service organisations representatives and currently serving ADF members attended what was a solemn, respectful and dignified service. The service was held on Vietnam Veterans' Day, 18 August which coincides with the anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. A poignant and emotional moment during the service was when all Vietnam Veterans were asked to stand; they received a well-deserved, protracted and rousing appliause.

The war was controversial at the time, but those who answered our nation's call served with distinction. For many years that service went without proper recognition. Likewise, the lingering effects of war on our veterans' mental and physical health was poorly understood. That is why it is so important for us to acknowledge all those who served in the Vietnam War and the families who support them still.

Lest we Forget



ADVOCACY ENDEAVOURS UNDERWAY

- DVA to undertake a research project on partner employment and the efficiency of current programs.
- Working with DVA and Military and Emergency Services Health Australia, an a number of organisations and lived experience leaders in our community to develop a frameworks and support for families bereaved by suicide.
- Participate in cross-community Domestic & Intimate Partner Community of Practice, working towards a coordinated whole of community approach. This group continues to provide recommendations for Family and Domestic Violence issues across Defence and DVA as well as the broader sector.
- National War Widows Day 19 October.
- 'Defence or veteran family' tick box on education enrollment forms in all states and territories (SA, ACT and NT on board already!) with more we hope to come in the new year.
- While case work is not my primary role, my office continues to be successful in advocating for and escalating complex cases.

FEATURED ACHIEVEMENTS

- Successfully advocated for DVA to include Veteran Families in their 2023-24 Corportate Plan. To ensure veteran families are recognised and identified as DVA clients in their own right.
- Advocated successfully for DVA to continue to include 'Security and Safety' in the Wellbeing Framework.
- In 2017 and 2018, a group of us advocated for the Australian War Memrial to establish the Suffering of War and Service Committee. After many years of work, the Sufferings of War and Service sculpture, 'For Every Drop Shed in Anguish' will be launched on 22 February 2024.

ENGAGEMENTS

Since commencing my role, I have attended approximately 2,000 meetings and engaged with more than 15,000 veterans and families. In the first half of 2023, I held six community consultation sessions in the NT, SA, VIC, NSW, and ACT for the Family Strategy and the

ROYAL COMMISSION

On 31 August, I gave evidence to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide in my capacity as the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, I provided my views on the challenges in the role, issues with current services and supports and the importance of increasing the visibility, recognition and services for Defence and veteran families. In my evidence, I tried to represent the diverse issues that veterans and families experience throughout their lives, so they are understood, valued and addressed.

Reform of legislation, systems and policies is complex work. We need to ensure any reforms are efficient, equitable for all, and flexible enough to respond to future needs. At the same time, transparency and **accountability** need to be built into the systems, not only as a means to hold Government to account, but so changes can be monitored; specifically what impact the Royal Commission's recommendations are having on veterans and families once implemented.

We know that the wellbeing of veterans and families is heavily dependent on their needs being understood and met. Our services must be informed by families' lived experiences. The research is clear: ADF members perform better and serve longer when their family is happy, healthy and stable. Families lives and wellbeing are also directly affected by Defence life. We need to make sure Defence and veteran families are not disadvantaged by Defence life. If we fail to meaningfully engage families and meet their needs, we will not get the best outcomes for our families, our veterans or Defence.

Families come in all shapes and sizes so any **Legislative framework** needs to be inclusive of the wide range of veteran families – be those parents, grandparents, children, step-children, step-parents, aunties, uncles, siblings, support people, mates etc.

The current **investment** in organisations that provide services and supports to current and ex-serving members and their families is not enough. For our community this translates into a lack of commitment, a lack of understanding and a lack of acceptance of the role families play in the health and wellbeing of a serving and ex-serving members. Significant investment is needed to improve the experience and outcomes for veteran families and give them the appropriate support, tools, information and pathways to care.

It's also time to invest in postvention. What is postvention? **Postvention** is simply specific support for families after a suicide. We currently are not doing enough. Postvention recognises that suicide has a profound impact that differs from other deaths. Those of us who have lost someone to suicide are at an increased risk of dying by suicide themselves. We are also likely to experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress. We may become socially isolated, struggle with feelings of guilt and shame or succumb to substance abuse. But with targeted support, risks can be managed and families given the best chance to rebuild their lives after suicide. When done well, we can actually experience more post traumatic growth than those who do not go through these types of programs. I can report that conversations are now happening at DVA and with a number of other organisations about how to do this, and I will keep pushing until we have something substantial to offer veteran families.

Effective **communication** is a critical component to solving the problem in front of us. Getting families and veterans the right information at the right time *AND* making sure they know where to go to get that information when they need it is something we need to do better. People don't often care about things until they are relevant to them. So we have at least two options, 1) make sure they know why the information is important and relevant when we are sharing it, and 2) make sure they know where to go when they need it.

These are but a few things that I discussed in my Royal Commission hearing. The Royal Commission is a once in a generation opportunity to bring about considerable systematic and structural change. It isn't small iterative changes that we need. We need fundamental change and **cultural** shifts so that families are recognised and included, rather than solely focusing on veterans to the exclusion of families. We need to do better at understanding and valuing lived experiences of families and then using that knowledge to influence those at the decision making table. I would like to thank the Commissioners for their dedication to bringing these important issues into the light, and I forward to seeing their final report next year.

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

St John of God Richmond Opening Wellness Centre

It was great to attend the opening of St John of God Richmond Hospital's new Wellness Centre and the Annual Veterans' Day Service on the 3 August. The Hospital's redevelopment is a key

element of their National Centre for Psychological Trauma Project to improve the lives of veterans and first responders recovering from trauma. This Wellness Centre will provide a comprehensive and holistic



mental health care service in tranquil settings. It will offer patients an opportunity to recover in a supportive and caring environment. Former Governor-General, General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK AC Mil CVO MC (Retd), as patron of the redevelopment campaign, officially opened the



Wellness Centre. The Centre includes a gym, indoor pool and other essential facilities that support physical and mental health. It is the latest part of St John of God's plan to deliver life-changing mental health care. James McMahon DSC, AM, DSM was the key guest speaker for the Veterans' Day Service which was held after the opening. I look forward to hearing about the benefits this Centre will bring to our veteran community in the Richmond area and seeing the next phase of the redevelopment opened in 2024.

Services NSW Vehicle Registration

For the first time ever, my vehicle registration as a widow was processed automatically. Finally, the Services NSW system is recognising eligible veterans and families under MRCA.



We have been advocating for this change since 2017. Well done to those who worked for this change and thank you to NSW Veterans Officer team for your persistence! Small changes like these make a massive difference to veterans and families trying to manage busy lives.

Commando Welfare Trust - Annual Charity Ball

The Commando Welfare Trust (CWT) Charity Ball was a memorable evening, filled with entertainment by MC Merrick Watts, engaging talks and inspiring stories, as well as a great opportunity to connect with new and old families within the Special Forces community. The evening celebrated the 80th

Anniversary of Operation Jaywick on 8th Sept 23 at the Maritime Museum Sydney, which is a significant milestone in our Australian Special Operations history. The event was a tribute to the brave men and women who have served and continue to serve in our Special Operations Command. It also raised funds for the CWT charity that



supports those serving and retired veterans' and family members of the Australian Special Operations community.

Commissioner Nick Kaldas Press Club Address

On 13 September, I attended the National Gallery of Australia to hear Nick Kaldas APM, Chair of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, speak on "The tragedy of veteran suicide: How Australia has failed its finest".



The Royal Commission has been working hard to determine the key causes of veteran suicide and put forward a series of recommendations on how the nation can better support our current and ex-serving ADF personnel. The Royal Commission released an interim report last year that the

Department of Veterans' Affairs has been working on in partnership with Government and the Department of Defence to implement.

It was thought provoking to hear Commissioner Kaldas' insights and what he thinks the way forward will be for how we work to prevent suicide and support those who may be struggling.

After recently receiving a three-month extension, the final report is due to be released by Monday 9 September 2024. I remain on the RC External Stakeholder Advisory Committee and will continue my advocacy with the Royal Commissioners to ensure veteran families are considered in the final report. More information can be found at Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Prime Minister's National Veterans Employment

On 13 September, I had the privilege to present the award for Partner Entrepreneur of the Year. Well done to Angie Weeks, PTSD Dogs Australia. It was so inspiring to hear her story.

As with other years, there was an impressive and strong line up of finalists.

Congratulations to all the amazing nominees, finalists and winners.

These awards serve as a shining example of what our veterans and families can achieve in their professional lives.

For a long time the employment of Defence and

veteran partners has been an invisible issue. Partners face many barriers to gaining meaningful employment and yet they have so much to offer. To thrive in military life, partners develop skills that many employers value: resilience, flexibility, resourcefulness and a community focused mind-set. They have

the ability to work well under pressure and balance stress. They



also have a willingness to jump right in and learn new skills on the fly. These skills are relevant to any organisation. As these awards highlight, with the right support, there's no limit to what our veterans and families can achieve.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation

18 October I had the pleasure of visiting The Australian Centre for Social Innovation - in South Australia (TACSI). It was wonderful to meet with CEO Carolyn Curtis and her team. We learned more about the innovative work they are doing to solve some of the toughest challenges in our society. At the core of TACSI's values lies the fundamental belief that the best solutions come from working alongside the people who are facing those very challenges. It is the right combination of

practical wisdom, lived experience and data and evidence that lead to the best outcomes. I think we can earn from the value this model places on iterative processes over pilots for future programs.



War Widows Day

19 October was an incredible day of recognition for the late Jesse Vasey - the founder of the Australian War Widows Guild. It was celebrated in a number of our states. I was fortunate to be among the many people who gathered at Admiralty House in the morning for a delightful morning tea. It was wonderful to witness the immense sense of community as we shared stories of our beloved family members, and were blessed with



poignant words from Her Excellency Linda Hurley. Later, at a public service in Martin Place, I was filled with such reverence and admiration as Bree Till spoke from the heart.

War Widows Day is not just a day to remember but a call to action to do more. A special thank you to the Governor General and Mrs Hurley, NSW Minister for Veterans David Harris, the AWWNSW and Legacy for this beautiful event.

It's time that we recognise the service and sacrifice of all Defence and veteran families nationally with a National War Widows Day!



Prince's Trust Australia 2023 Beyond Service Awards

Congratulations to all the finalists and winners at the Prince's Trust Australia, 2023 Beyond Service Awards. It was wonderful to be part of such an inspiring event on 23 October and hear about all the amazing work veteran and veteran family entrepreneurs are doing. These awards celebrate the remarkable skills and expertise that veterans and defence families bring to their communities and businesses. Special congratulations to award winners Ian Rawson - Warfighter Coffee Brewed Therapy, Nadia Teong - Veterans Psychology, Karyn Hinder - Working Spirit and Hayley Boswell, Defence Kidz. What an inspiring night to celebrate these change makers for their noble efforts in making a positive impact.



SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Remembrance Day

Exactly 12 months ago, I had the privilege of completing a oncein-a-lifetime journey across the historic Kokoda Track and how it

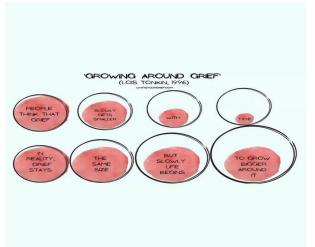


has left me with an incredible sense of appreciation and admiration for our Second World War heroes and all those who have served in the line of duty. Remembrance Day is a day where we stop to honour and remember, as well as to pay tribute to those who have made the ultimate

sacrifice while serving our country. The beauty, the hardship and the bravery of the Australian Diggers has been forever etched in the unique terrain of the Kokoda Track, and their courage and tenacity lives on. We remember those men and women who paved the way for us to live in peace, reminding us to take a moment to immerse ourselves in their stories and honour their service. It is our duty to remember not only the heroes, but those they left behind and the families who stood by them.

Families Bereaved By Suicide Workshop

22 and 23 November, I met with some of the bravest people in our community - families whose lives have been forever changed by the tragic loss of a loved one to suicide. While we must keep working to reduce suicide rates, we also must bring into light the crucial conversation of support to families and communities after a suicide. I am working with DVA to build a framework to support people following the loss of a loved one to suicide. Providing people with right support, we can ensure these families have the tools to heal and grieve in a safe and empathetic environment. When postvention is done right, families have the best chance to rebuild their lives after such a devastating loss. This is one of the first steps in making sure that families bereaved by suicide are seen and heard and that current and future programs meet their needs. Thank you to the Governor General, the Secretary and the team at DVA and many others for hearing my call to action and making sure we are progressing this critical work.



Open Arms National Advisory Committee



In late November a two-day Open Arms National Advisory Committee Meeting was held. Assistant Minister Veterans Affairs, Matt Thistlethwaite MP was also there to listen and hear some of the issues and discussion. From talking

about the peer program, the Open Arms' model of care, the GP Project, emergency response strategies, advocacy, to issues in aged care - we made so much progress. I am eager to see the impact this NAC has on our veterans and families.

Hosted Conversation around 16 Days of Activism

I addressed more than 600 DVA staff about the significance of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, a global campaign led by UN Women from November 25 to December 10. This year's theme, "Invest to Prevent," aligns with the 2024 priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women, emphasising the crucial role of financial support in preventing violence.

Drawing on my career experiences globally, including three impactful years in Afghanistan, I've consistently worked towards stability and relief for families in crisis. Plainly, violence against women is preventable, and we must shift towards a future defined by safety, equality, and respect.

In Australia, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a significant public health concern, particularly among current and former ADF members. The recently released IPV Report delves into exposure rates, risk factors, and health correlates. The statistics reveal a stark reality — one in six Australian women face gender-based violence, mostly within their homes. Our collective responsibility is to challenge cultural norms perpetuating such violence, with a focus on breaking the silence and understanding drivers, including the impact of a highly masculine environment. By openly discussing and normalising conversations, involving everyone, including men, we can create a future free from so much violence. Let's stand up, speak out, and support each other for lasting change — everyone's commitment is crucial.

Stop Domestic Violence Conference



On 28 November I attended the Stop Domestic Violence Conference in Hobart. It was inspiring to be surrounded by change makers and advocates dedicated to ending domestic violence. The speakers shared insights

on topics such as elder abuse, law and justice reforms, violence in under-represented communities, and the question of what healthy masculinity looks like. I'm feeling energised after attending, knowing that great work is happening all over the country to make a difference.

100 YEARS of LEGACY

National Launch of Legacy Week 2023

Despite the cloudy skies on the 28 August, my family and I were delighted to attend the National Launch of Legacy Week 2023 at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Legacy patron and His



Excellence, The Governor-General of Australia, General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) spoke about how 'Legacy is that knock on the door that says: 'We care. We will look after you' and how that knock can be life changing'. Many of us know just how life saving that knock from Legacy can be. Legacy widow and veteran Maureen Barrett shared her moving story which reminded us all of why Legacy

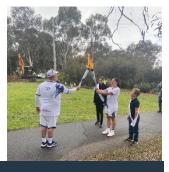
exists and its continuing need. The Legacy Week appeal has been running since the 1940's and is a time for all Australians to show their support for the families of defence personnel who gave their life or health in defence of our nation. Without the continued support and donations of the community Legacy services wouldn't' be possible. Well done to all the legatees and volunteers who made another Legacy week successful.

Legacy Centennial Torch Relay Torchbearer



I had the honour of participating as a torchbearer in the Legacy Centennial Torch Relay 2023 as it travelled through Canberra. As my children and I stood together, I couldn't help but reflect on the how every passing generation has carried this torch forward over the last century, ensuring that our promise stands strong. My heartfelt

thanks to Legacy and all the incredible work for our community and your unwavering commitment to honour the sacrifices made by our brave serviceman and women and the struggles their families endure.



Well done Legacy!

Here is to the next 100.

Let's keep the flame alive!

Legacy Centenary Commemoration Ceremony

On 13 October, the Legacy Centenary Torch reached its final destination at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. It was amazing to watch the relay which began 6 months ago in



Pozières France and has travelled over 50,000 km, visiting all 44 Legacy Clubs in Australia and being carried by 1,300+ torch bearers!



A huge shout-out to the amazing Legacy Australia, Legacy Clubs, torch bearers, volunteers, sponsors, event organisers, and Defence Australia for making this happen.

Legacy National Conference

To end a great year, the Legacy Australia National Conference on the 14 October in Melbourne. I joined the conference and advocated for vital support for bereaved parents of veterans, for psycho-education for those who are bereaved, and for true collaboration with other organisations that work with veteran families. It was inspiring to hear from other Legacy families, how Legacy is working to get things right for their families, and how legacy wants to progress into the next 100 years!

Legacy Centenary Dinner

What an incredible evening of celebration at Legacy's Centenary Dinner! It was humbling to be surrounded by Defence personnel, veterans, Legatees, and veteran families – all inspired by the values and commitment to serve veteran



families across our nation. We're so fortunate to have so many dedicated supporters of Legacy Australia, and I can't help but

feel optimistic for what the next several decades will bring as we work together to transform the way we support our veteran families.

IPV STUDY RELEASED

Understanding Intimate Partner Violence in Australian Military & Veteran Families: Insights and a Call to Action'

The ground-breaking "Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Report," a collaborative effort between the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs and Phoenix Australia, compassionately delves into the raw truths surrounding intimate partner violence (IPV) within military and veteran families. Released on November 29, 2023, this report not only uncovers stark statistics but courageously brings forth the human narratives behind the numbers, challenging us to confront and act upon this pressing issue.

Against the backdrop of existing national and state family violence strategies, the report boldly acknowledges recent policy advancements recognising military and veteran families as a distinct group. Revelations cut through the data - one in five military personnel and veterans reported recent IPV exposure, with even higher rates among veteran families. Collaborative initiatives between Phoenix Australia and the Department of Veterans' Affairs aim to dismantle data silos, underlining the critical need for tailored mental health and family support services for our military heroes and their families.

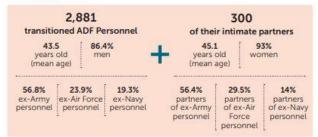
This report isn't just about percentages; it's a testament to the resilience of those who've served and their families. It boldly confronts provider perspectives on the root causes of violence, demanding a shared understanding and compassionate responses. It fearlessly tackles the intricacies of disclosure within the military context, recognising the historical complexities at play. Unapologetically, it calls out the disparities in risk assessment and safety approaches.

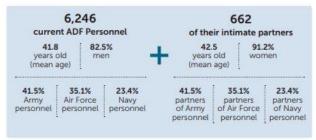
Building on the initial project, a second IPV endeavour commissioned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs amplifies the voices of current and ex-service personnel and their partners. With an unwavering acknowledgment of data limitations, the report shares key findings on IPV exposure frequencies, mental health correlates, and help-seeking patterns, weaving a tapestry of human experience.

Compassionate insights transcend the numbers, revealing not only high rates of seeking assistance but also the pivotal role of general healthcare services. Varied help-seeking patterns among veterans and the complex mental health profiles of transition personnel using IPV demand bold, nuanced responses. The report concludes with a resounding call to action, urging the establishment of a comprehensive framework, targeted mental health support, preventative measures, and ongoing research. It challenges us to embrace the complexity of this issue and calls for sustained, bold responses. The final plea is for ongoing collaboration and unwavering support for veteran families navigating the painful realities of violence.

This study is a manifesto, a declaration that goes beyond statistics. It's a call for empathy, courage, and decisive action to address IPV exposure not just within mainstream health services but also within the unique and urgent needs of our veteran communities.

Participants:





Infographic 1: Intimate Partner Violence among current and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel and families: Summary of findings: Participants

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Survey Measures:

All participants who were in intimate relationships were asked to self-report on their exposure to IPV in their current relationship. This included questions about:







Infographic 2: Intimate Partner Violence among current and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel and families: Summary of findings: Survey Measures

Feel the Magic

Each year in Australia, around 1 in 20 children will experience the death of a parent before age 18¹. To put this statistic into perspective, at least one child in every classroom is grieving the loss of a parent. To add to this, there is also sibling and guardian loss.

According to 2021 data², suicide is the leading cause of death for individuals aged 15 to 49 in Australia. In many of these instances the death will leave a child mourning the loss of a parent or sibling.

In the veteran community, there are 38,776 war widow/ers recognised under the Veterans; Entitlement Act³. Many of these are likely to have children or grandchildren who experience grief.

The death of a parent is an exceptionally distressing event for a child. It can have profound implications for their future development and well-being.

Research⁴ shows that childhood bereavement can cause disruptions in relational, academic, and occupational functioning later in life. It is also associated with greater risk of harmful coping, mental health disorders, substance abuse and suicide.

One study⁵ revealed that bereaved children are more than twice as likely to display impairments in functioning at school and in the home.

Children suffering bereavement after a suicide are more likely to experience anger, shame, withdrawal, guilt, and posttraumatic stress symptoms.

Feel the Magic is an Australian charity providing early intervention grief education programs for kids aged 7 to 18, who are experiencing pain and isolation due to the death of a parent, guardian or sibling.

Its aim is to create a community where grieving kids and their families feel supported and empowered to move forward with

their lives and to reduce the mental health challenges often associated with childhood grief.

It has a range of camps, programs and resources to prepare children for living healthily with their grief. It also recognises the financial burden bereaved families can often experience and so they offer all their programs completely free.

I know firsthand the benefits that can come from their programs. My kids have been to Camp Magic. It was a transformational weekend where they worked together on fun physical challenges and learned vital skills for healing and coping with grief. We have learned so much and have found them to be a great source of support and guidance.

So, I encourage you to find out more, join their community and help reduce the mental health challenges from childhood bereavement.



Written with permission from Feel the Magic: Childhood Bereavement Prevalence - Feel the Magic

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









¹ <u>Australian Bureau of Statistics, Parental Divorce or Death During Childhood</u>

² <u>Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs Stats at a Glance September 2022</u>

³ <u>Australian Bureau of Statistics, Causes of Death Australia 19 October 2022</u>

⁴ SpringerLink, Interventions for Young Bereaved Children: A Systematic Review and Implications for School Mental Health Providers

⁵ University of Pittsburgh Department of Psychiatry, In Longest and Most Detailed Study of Pediatric Grief Following Parental Loss to Date, Department Researchers Find Increased Rates of Depression and Functional Impairment