

# Female Veterans

POLICY FORUM

10 OCTOBER 2017



Australian Government  
Department of Veterans' Affairs

transforming  
**DVA**



## Thank You

The Department of Veterans' Affairs would like to thank the participants of the 2017 Female Veterans Policy Forum for their perspectives, ideas and experiences they shared during the Forum, and their ongoing contribution to the ex-service community.

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The second meeting of the Female Veterans Policy Forum (the Forum) was convened on 10 October 2017 in Canberra, with twenty-three female veteran participants.

The Forum was established by the Coalition Government to provide a platform for female veterans to raise with Government and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) issues relating to their unique needs.

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## OBJECTIVES

The Forum objectives were to:

- Build a strong network across representative female veterans.
- Develop ideas and potential solutions to the complex challenges facing female veterans and veterans' families.
- Connect participants to DVA's Veteran Centric Reform and the progress made since the inaugural Forum.
- Connect senior DVA and Government representatives to the experiences of female veterans and their suggested solutions to complex challenges.

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## STRUCTURE

The Forum was highly participative and solutions focused, with participants engaging in a range of activities and discussion topics. The Forum comprised of six sessions.

Session 1: Introductions and networking

Session 2: Veteran Centric Reform and My Service

Session 3: Policy Challenges and Developing Solutions

Session 4: Presenting suggested solutions to a panel of senior DVA and Department of Defence (Defence) representatives

Session 5: Presenting suggested solutions to the Hon Dan Tehan MP<sup>1</sup>

Session 6: Future of the Forum and final comments

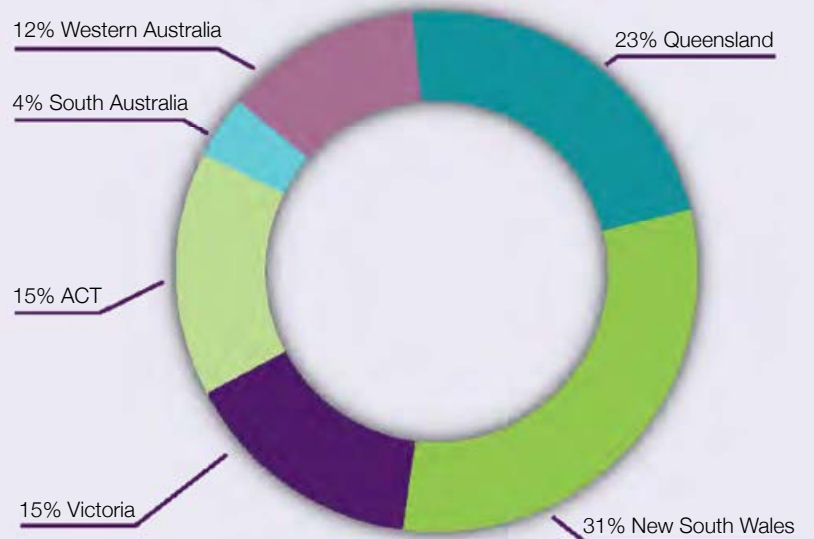
Most time was allocated to Session 3.

1. The Hon Dan Tehan MP was Minister for Veterans' Affairs from 18.02.16–20.12.17

## ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Participants were drawn from around Australia with the majority of participants coming from New South Wales.

### Where do you live?



### Which ADF service did you serve in?



All of the services were represented at the Forum. The majority of participants had served or were serving in the Australian Army (Army).

Approximately half of the participants also attended the 2016 Forum.

# WHAT HAS CHANGED?



As part of the introductions, participants reflected on the changes and achievements they had experienced in their personal, professional or volunteering roles over the previous twelve months.

## VETERAN CENTRIC REFORM

Ms Liz Cosson, DVA Chief Operating Officer, addressed the group and provided an overview of the work underway as part of DVA's Veteran Centric Reform (VCR). Ms Cosson noted that DVA was provided with \$166 million in the 2017–18 Budget to improve the DVA client service delivery experience by investing in a transformation of DVA's ICT, processes and culture.

Ms Cosson provided detail of the work underway, including:

- Improving the connections between DVA and Defence, specifically determining what information needs to be shared between both agencies in order to improve outcomes for veterans and their families.
- Making the support available across Defence, DVA and Ex-Service Organisation (ESO) services clearer to current and former serving ADF members.
- The establishment of a Transition Taskforce to identify the barriers to effective transition and recommend actions to improve the transition experience for ADF members and their families.
- Supporting the role of the family in supporting currently serving/transitioned ADF members and veterans.
- Simplifying DVA's complex claims process.
- Recognising the unique needs of female veterans.

Ms Cosson highlighted that feedback from the first Forum has directly influenced the focus of the Veteran Centric Reform program.

*'My vision is that when you enlist, DVA is part of your career journey—we know when you deploy, you automatically get qualifying service if you're deployed, we know if you get injured, and when you're discharging you will know that DVA is there.'*

*'Under the Early Engagement Model, members are now being registered with DVA on enlistment. This will allow DVA to begin engaging with members and their families earlier.'*

*'A key aspect of DVA's transformation program is looking at ways to improve our services. We are doing this by piloting a number of different initiatives designed to test new ways of serving and supporting veterans.'*



## MYSERVICE

DVA representatives Ms Monita Lal and Mr Josh Spencer provided an overview of the development of MyService. MyService is a simple digital solution that redesigns the initial liability claim process so that clients can obtain the assistance they require more quickly and easily. Ms Lal and Mr Spencer highlighted that:

- MyService was designed in collaboration with current and potential DVA clients. It was released to a small group in October 2016 for further testing and refinement. In April 2017 the public version was released.
- MyService has reduced claim questions from 36 in the paper process to between three and seven intuitive questions in the on-line MyService. The questions were co-designed with clients to optimise information collection upfront.
- As at 10 October 2017, there had been 436 registrations and 352 claims made. Of those 352 claims, 139 claims had been determined, with an average processing time of 29 days. This is around 25% of the average time taken to process the some Initial Liability claims submitted through traditional channels.
- MyService has also simplified the needs assessment process, with questions now asked at the initial liability claim. This will help DVA provide information earlier, and help to ensure that assistance is tailored to clients' needs. On the policy front there has been eight conditions approved to use the ADF basic training regime and service related information as a basis for delegates to approve the condition without further investigation. These are referred to as Decision Ready Processing (DRP).
- Since the 1 August 2017, DRP conditions have been built into MyService. For clients, the experience is a shorter claim process. For DVA delegates, the experience is a shortened decision making process.

In reflecting on MyService, one forum participant said:

*'DVA should be applauded, for recognising that there's an issue and are seeking to fix it—even if it's in baby steps.'*



## WORKING ON CHALLENGES

The Forum provided an opportunity for participants to develop potential solutions to address significant challenges impacting their community. These challenges included:

- A. How do we grow the Australian community's respect for female veterans?
- B. How might we respond to families' needs, to reduce the risk of intergenerational mental health issues?
- C. How might we support veteran families experiencing domestic violence?
- D. How might we improve service access to respond to the specific health needs of female veterans?

Participants worked in four groups and presented their ideas to a panel of senior DVA and Defence representatives. Participants were asked to design a policy, service, product, payment or information campaign to answer their challenge. They were invited to consider whether there are opportunities for DVA to connect with services or organisations that already exist in the community. Each group created a 'billboard' to document the key components of their ideas.

Topic overviews, summaries of each group's presentation, a photo of their billboard, and the panel's feedback are included in the following pages.





## Summary of Presentation by Group A

### Establish an 'I Am A Veteran' campaign

- The purpose of this campaign would be to raise awareness and respect for female veterans within the community.

### Target audience

- Schools—to educate the future generation through school programs.
- Veterans—participants perceive that some male veterans are not aware that recognition and respect is not always afforded to female veterans.
- The public—to educate the broader Australian community on the role of females in the ADF.

*'When you ask the community what a veteran looks like, they don't say female veterans. They generally think of older males, but there isn't any one 'look' or type of veteran.'*

### Campaign options

- The context of the campaign is, 'I am a veteran'. This would include a series of advertisements featuring both male and female veterans to highlight the diversity of today's veteran.
- The campaign could focus on younger veterans from East Timor, Iraq, and Afghanistan and show both female and male veterans in non-traditional roles, or male and female veterans performing identical job roles.
- The campaign could also include an educational component targeting schools i.e. 'I love a veteran'. This could include images and stories of mothers going on and returning from deployments.

### Other opportunities to grow respect for female veterans included:

- Generating awareness through community events, such as encouraging female veterans to march together at Anzac Day parades, promoting female veterans at the Australian War Memorial's Last Post services, or partnering with the Australian Football League Women and/or the Rugby codes to establish Anzac games promoting female veterans.
- Appointing a national female veteran 'champion'.
- Increasing the presence of female veterans in ESOs, by increasing the number of female advocates and having more women in decision-making roles.

Group A participants noted that such a campaign needs to be tailored, coordinated, and synchronised. Consistent messaging was an important element of the campaign.

### Panel Feedback

The panel valued group A's ideas to grow the respect for Australia's female veterans. They responded very positively to the proposed campaign's tagline of 'I am a veteran' and the inclusiveness of the campaign. They reflected the campaign would work well on social media.

# CHALLENGE B:

## HOW MIGHT WE RESPOND TO FAMILIES' NEEDS, TO REDUCE THE RISK OF INTERGENERATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES?

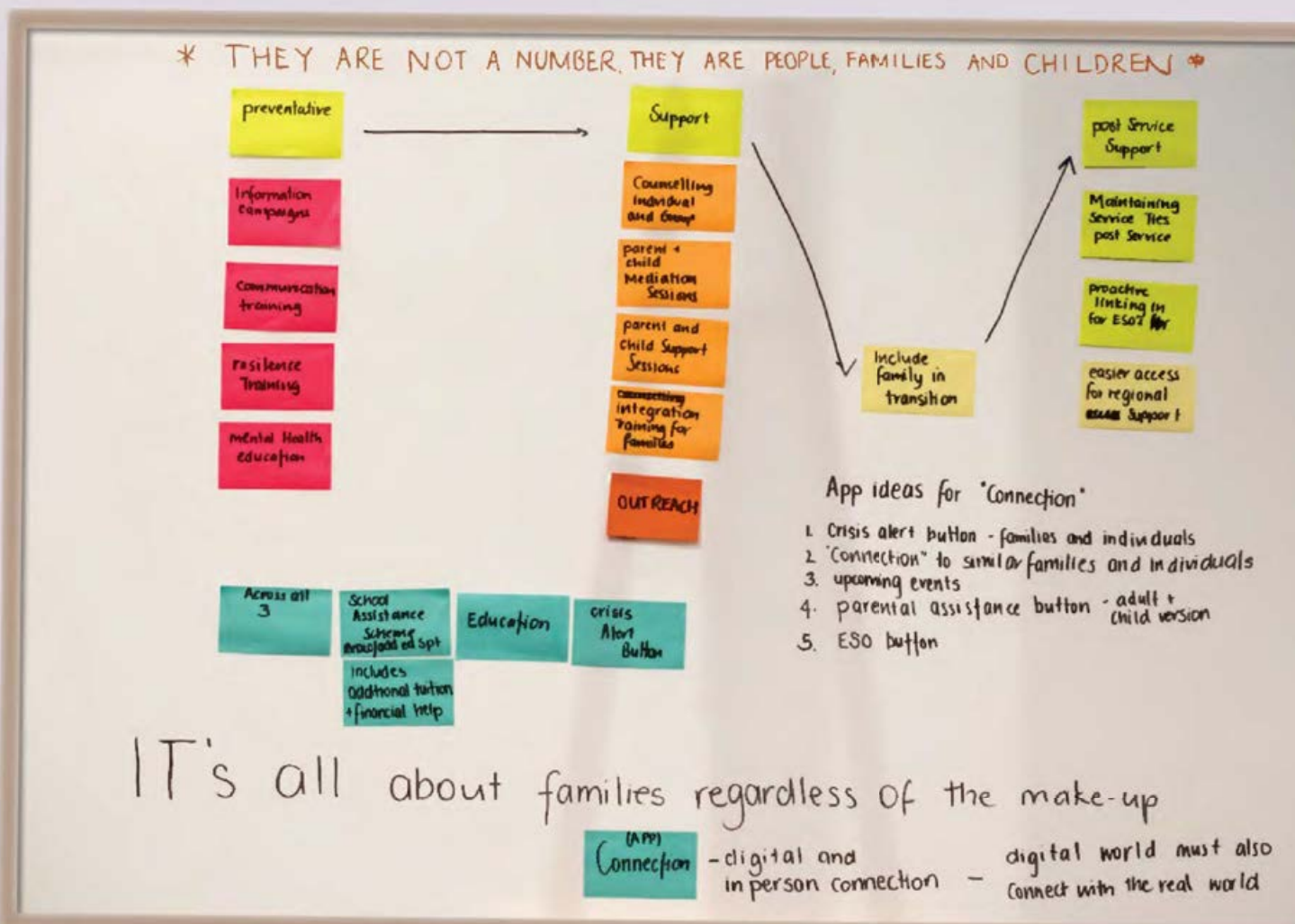
### TOPIC OVERVIEW

The impacts of military service on the mental health of veterans are well recognised. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) provides a wide range of psychological support to veterans to manage these impacts.

The impacts of military service on the families of veterans are less well recognised by the Australian community, particularly the intergenerational impacts of military service. Researchers focused on mental health impacts of military service write:

*'The extent and nature of the intergenerational impact of trauma is still being investigated and understood... Evidence suggests that the children of some veterans experience poorer mental and physical health. These consequences may be related to parental trauma or PTSD, or to the prolonged parental absence associated with deployment.'*

(Phelps et al 2016 'Military and Veteran Mental Health Annual Literature Scan 2015').



## Summary of Presentation by Group B

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### **Context**

To help the panel understand the challenge, Group B participants provided examples of their lived experiences.

*'I was a single mother to four daughters, one had separation anxiety as child and now has depression and anxiety as an adult. I have two more children diagnosed with mental health disorders, with one self-harming at age thirteen. They've had fifteen years of watching their mum suffering, without knowing why. They've been homeless twice, as we weren't on DVA payments initially. My kids have known homelessness and suicide.'*

*'They're not a number, they're a person, a parent, a child. We need to look after them from the beginning.'*

### **Ideas and solutions**

Group B structured their ideas around 'three pillars' i.e. prevention, support and post-service support.

### **Prevention**

*'Prevention is always better than a cure. Prevention will stop veterans and their families from experiencing these intergenerational mental health issues.'*

### **Strategies include:**

- Information campaigns to teach members and their families about service life, what to expect and how to cope with the consequences of service life. This information needs to be tailored to family needs and provided on an ongoing basis as family circumstances change.
- Communication training for families focusing on how to communicate more effectively.
- Resilience training for service families, because while members undertake resilience training during service their families may not be taught resilience building skills.
- Mental health education for both the member and their families.

## Support

The support veteran families need includes:

- Parent and child mediation sessions, which could be run through the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) or with trained mediators to mediate crisis events and de-escalate tensions within the home.
- Post-deployment reintegration training to help families re-establish relationships.
- Parent and child support bonding sessions, where veterans with mental health conditions and their children undertake enjoyable activities together to strengthen their relationship.
- Outreach services to address gaps in child mental health support through individual and group counselling for families.
- Family inclusion in transition processes.

## Post-service support

- Maintaining service ties with the ADF after separation is important for the provision of support post-service.
- The ESO community needs to be better linked together to ensure that families access integrated service and support.
- Improve access to regional-based services.
- Develop an 'app' called 'Connection', which would link the veteran and their family with services and support. The app would:
  - Include a Crisis alert button;
  - Connect veterans and their families with people in similar circumstances;
  - Provide assistance for parents and children;
  - Link the veteran and their families with ESO support.

The name 'Connection' was chosen by participants because social connectivity post service can help people maintain and/or re-establish a sense of community and belonging, and provide an avenue for support.

*'We're looking for connection post-service. We miss our connection with the military, and our children miss the connection with us.'*

## Panel Feedback

The panel commended the group's courage in sharing their lived experiences and focusing on strategies to prevent intergenerational mental health issues. The panel recognised the importance of the 'three pillar approach' and of exploring opportunities to educate schools about the needs of veterans' children.





# CHALLENGE C:

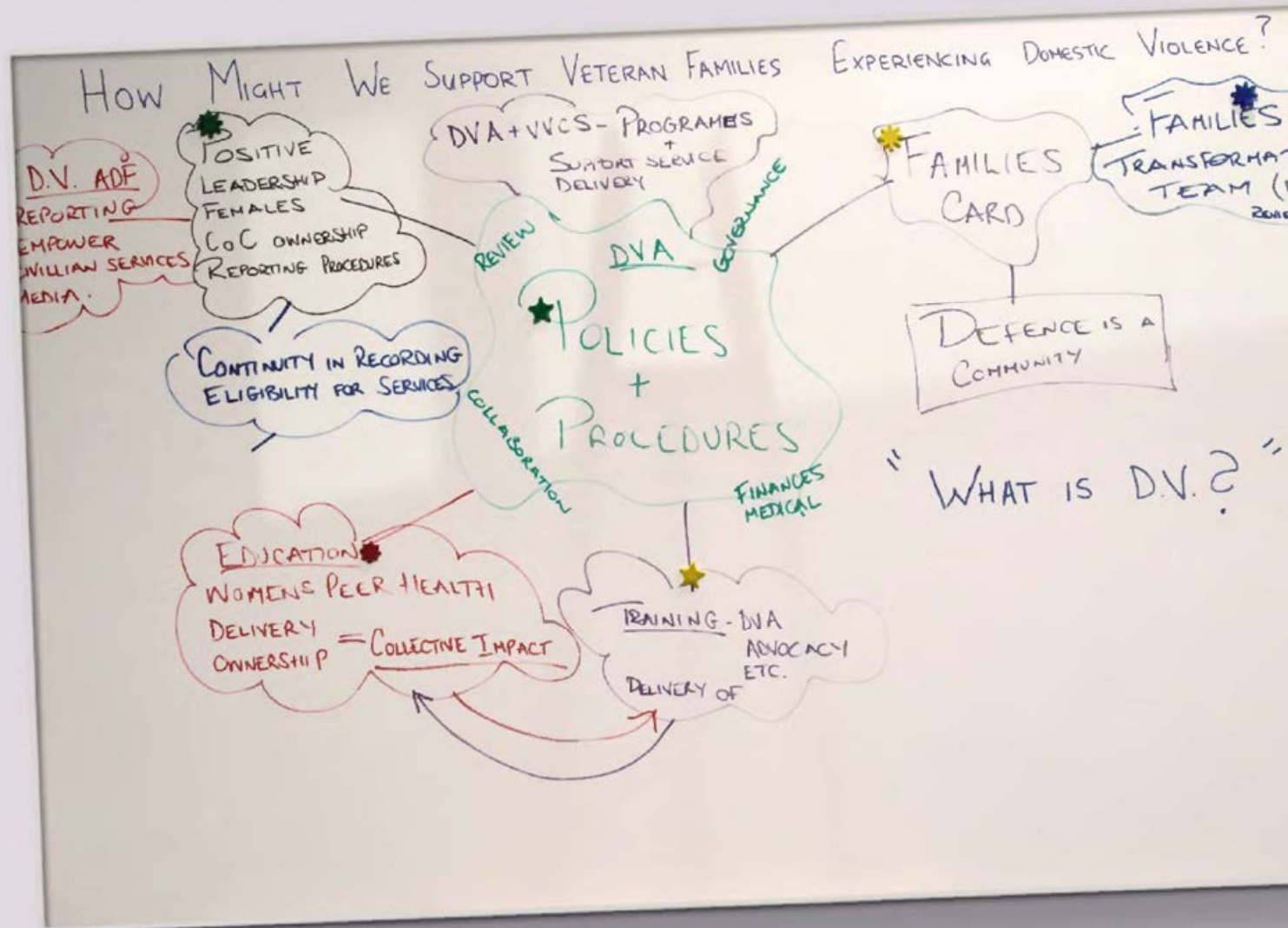
## HOW MIGHT WE SUPPORT VETERAN FAMILIES EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

### TOPIC OVERVIEW

Domestic and family violence is a serious problem, affecting all demographics in Australia and negatively impacting the health and wellbeing of those who experience it. Australian police deal with 5,000 domestic and family violence matters on average every week—one every two minutes.

People who are experiencing domestic violence may fear that reporting the violence may have negative impacts on themselves, their partner or their family.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) support the health and wellbeing of current and former serving members and their families and carers through a range of services and payments (including ongoing or one off payments).



## Summary of Presentation by Group C

### Group C participants made the following observations

*'Women suffer the majority of domestic violence. There are quite a few women in the room today who've been subjected to domestic violence. Domestic violence is a societal issue, not just an ADF issue.'*

*'Domestic violence doesn't happen in public, it's behind closed doors. It's the invisible perpetration of violence. There is a lot of domestic violence that we don't see—it could be domestic violence as a result of being isolated, of not being able to access financial resources or secure accommodation.'*

### Ideas and solutions

Group C developed ideas and solution to empower domestic violence survivors to seek help and support. These included:

- The establishment of a family transformation/domestic violence coordination team to connect victims of domestic violence with appropriate services and support.
- Provision of a DVA 'white card' to veterans' families to allow easy access to services and support.

*'I have a PM Keys number, I have a uniform, but what do families have to prove their service? They need a White Card that says they're a partner or child of a veteran. The support could be like non-liability healthcare for families, it would give the families the opportunity to get help, such as access to caseworkers and support services.'*

- Seamless support services are also required. This included services from the full spectrum of providers including State and Territory Governments, DVA, Defence and the ESOs. The issue needs to be tackled on a collective basis—collaboration between these sectors is important for collective social impact.

*'ESOs can't sit back, they have to play a role in supporting veteran families experiencing domestic violence.'*

- Defence to identify and empower families through specific domestic violence policies and procedures, including better reporting of incidents and the provision of domestic violence and mental health training.

Participants also reflected on the changing nature of families within the broader Australian community. Participants identified a need to consider extending DVA support to the ex-partners of veterans, and have regard to the needs of blended families. Participants stated that this support should be seamless and commence from an ADF members enlistment.

### Panel Feedback

The panel acknowledged the group's insightful consideration of this complex issue, and the potential of the proposed solutions. The panel also referenced some progress being made in attempting to break the cycle of domestic violence, for example the Chief of Army's video on domestic violence, 'Silence is the Accomplice.'

# CHALLENGE D:

## HOW MIGHT WE IMPROVE SERVICE ACCESS TO RESPOND TO THE SPECIFIC HEALTH NEEDS OF FEMALE VETERANS?

### TOPIC OVERVIEW

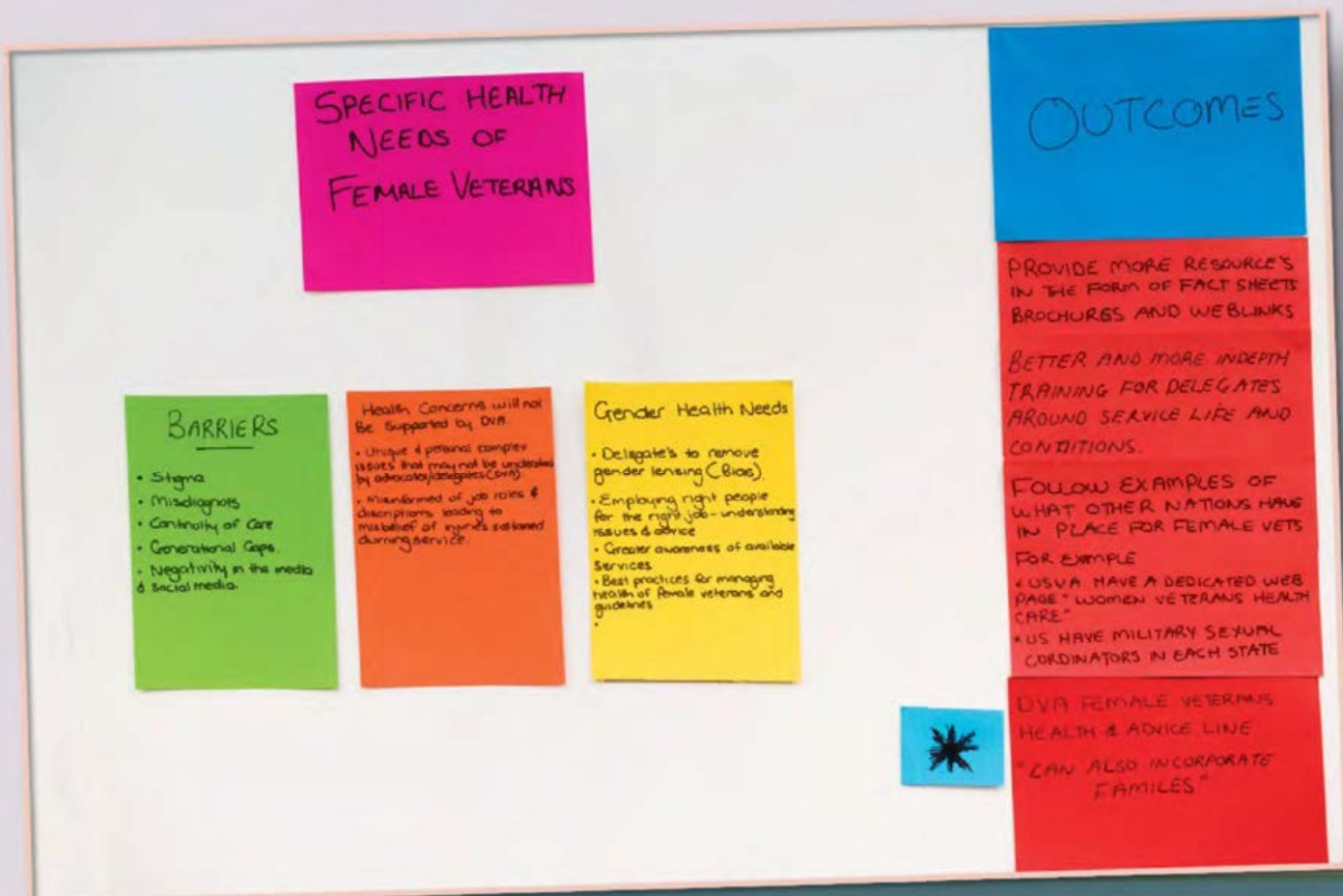
While Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) provides a wide range of health services, research suggests that female veterans are less likely to access veteran specific health services and experience barriers to accessing health services.

Academics studying the health of female veterans observe that as the number of female ADF members is increasing and women are entering into new job roles 'the health issues affecting servicewomen and female veterans can also be expected to increase'.<sup>2</sup>

There are barriers that prevent female veterans accessing service through DVA and VVCS.

Research suggests that some female veterans:

- perceive DVA and VVCS, and their services, as being male focused;
- feel that there is not suitable information about their gendered health needs;
- believe their health concerns will not be support by DVA;
- feel their experiences are unique; and
- are unsure of where to go for advice or support.<sup>3</sup>



## Summary of Presentation by Group D

### Group D participants reflected the following:

- DVA provides a range of health services, but female veterans are less likely to access these services. Female veterans perceive these services as predominately focused on men's health needs.
- Female veterans experience misdiagnoses of female specific health issues.
- Issues around continuity of care can significantly impact ongoing treatment for female specific health and wellbeing issues such as fertility and IVF.

*'We can see 4-5 specialists to get to the bottom of the issues.'*

- The importance of messages regarding non – tolerance of sexual trauma and domestic violence being communicated through all levels of military.

### Ideas and solutions

- Increased number of trained female advocates.
- Increase advocates and DVA delegates' knowledge of female specific health needs, and the impact of service on these needs.

*'They don't believe that we're doing the sort of work that we're doing.'*

*Delegates and advocates need to remove their gender bias.'*

- Increase the awareness of available services for female veterans through websites and promotional campaigns.
- Develop a dedicated website for female veterans' health needs, this site should have webchat functionality.
- Establish a dedicated military sexual trauma team/s based on the USA Veterans Affairs military sexual trauma service model.
- Establish a female health telephone advisory service.

### Feedback

The panel acknowledged the complexity of this issue, the groups' insightful consideration and the potential of the proposed solutions. The panel also referenced the role of Department of Defence's Sexual Misconduct Prevention & Response Office (SeMPRO) noting that SeMPRO is focused on providing services for ADF members who have been affected by sexual misconduct.

2. Crompvoets & Neuhaus 2013 *Australia's servicewomen and female veterans: do we understand their health needs?*

3. Crompvoets 2012 *The health and wellbeing of female Vietnam and contemporary veterans.*

## MINISTER'S ADDRESS

Each group presented a summary of their ideas and solutions to the Hon Dan Tehan MP<sup>1</sup>. The Minister addressed the Forum at the conclusion of these presentations.

Minister Tehan:

- Emphasised the importance of acknowledging female veterans, saying 'we have to continue to put a front foot forward when it comes to making sure that our female veterans are respected and acknowledged.'
- Invited the Forum participants to participate in a media event in the lead up to Armistice Day with the view of promoting the role and contribution of female veterans. '[We need to] make sure that we get the message out loudly and clearly, and we'll put another media release ahead of Armistice Day reminding people that it is Defence men and women who deploy on our behalf.'
- Highlighted the continued importance of taking a holistic view of each client's circumstances to ensure the best possible support services are provided to each individual.
- Stated that making the role of families more visible, and acting on their issues is important, saying 'we've got to make sure that people do not feel like they're just a number. We've got to ensure that people understand that they are individuals, [that] each one of them is unique, [that] each one of them is entitled to the support, the services that they need.'
- Emphasised the importance of understanding veterans' families' needs, saying 'We've got to highlight it, and then ensure that we continue to support the family, because if the family feels that it's invisible, we're not looking after our serving men and women as well as we should be.'
- Encouraged options to include female veteran health information in the existing Defence Portal, saying that 'you should be able to go on [to the Defence Portal] and find out what services are available [regarding female health information], and see all the things that are offered.'
- Thanked members for their participation in the Forum, emphasising the importance of their unfiltered feedback. 'These forums are so important because they enable you from the grassroots to give us that direct feedback.'



1. The Hon Dan Tehan MP was Minister for Veterans' Affairs from 18.02.16-20.12.17



# MOVING FORWARD

Participants were provided an opportunity to identify topics the Forum could focus on, or suggest ways the Forum should operate into the future. Where multiple participants identified an identical topic or way of working, this has only been included once.

## FUTURE TOPICS

### RESPECT FOR THE VETERAN

- I AM A VETERAN – Media and education plan.
- Promotion of female veterans in decision-making roles in ESOs.
- More support for Indigenous veterans' service ceremonies.
- Raising the profile of family and female veteran needs.

### CONNECTING VETERANS TO SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

- Lack of knowledge of what services are available.
- Women Veterans Health and Wellbeing on the DVA website.

### TRANSITION

- Female specific transition needs and post-transition employment opportunities.
- Female veteran employment program.
- Communication and support for members transitioning from Defence.

### EMPOWERING FEMALE VETERANS

- Female veteran programs in regional areas.
- Improve training for delegates with regards to service life and conditions.
- 'Stop paying civilians to do work that female veterans in the room can do!'

### TAILORED AND COORDINATED SERVICES

- Co-ordinating federal and state activities for veterans.
- Improve the standard of DVA letters to clients—they need to be personalised.
- Getting older veterans to acknowledge their need to collaborate and create a collective impact.
- Discover medical issues and access to medical services by female veterans.
- Support of female veterans and families.



## WAYS OF WORKING

### PARTICIPANTS ALSO SUGGESTED HOW THE FORUM SHOULD OPERATE INTO THE FUTURE.

- Networking and strengthening female veteran relationships.
- Acknowledge the negative of the past but focus on a positive future.
- Be less filtered and prescriptive regarding topics. Let the group connect to canvas for ideas.
- Support & encouragement.

### THE GROUP THEN DISCUSSED SOME OF THESE IDEAS:

*'I love the idea of women veteran health information on the DVA website. We haven't had enough support for women's health, unlike men's health through the Men's Health Peer Education program.'*

*'The "I am a veteran" campaign, because it allows us to acknowledge that yes we've served and should be very proud. We're not just an adjunct to the male veteran.'*

*'Increase community respect for female veterans within ESOs by increasing the inclusion and representations of women in ESO decision-making.'*

*'Modernising and centralising advocacy support in a modern workforce model. We rely on volunteer advocates, but it's difficult trying to keep them updated on the Acts and on the issues faced by women. Why can't we create a paid advocate workforce?'*

*'Focus on a DVA policy on sexual abuse. Some changes have already been made, but there's a long way to go.'*

*'Getting more of an insight into female veterans' transition and any specific issues they may face, like what jobs do they tend to move into? We could be at the forefront to help meet our unique transition needs.'*

*'Let the group tell us what it might want to look at'*

## FINAL COMMENTS

Participants reflected on the Forum and recorded comments to share with the group:

*If you give a seed funding to an organisation and make them responsible they will carry on. Advocacy to RSL they have \$.*

*How about improving the DVA claims process—to stop being confrontational and having delegates act like insurance assessors picking through every claim for any reason to deny liability! Then we wouldn't need more and better advocates!*

*Invitations should go out to all ESOs and every year it should be new voices, so you're then covering more issues and real life lived experiences.*

*Engagement, empowerment, correct concise investigations.*

*Support, connections and visibility for female veterans.*

*DVA White Cards for all veterans.*

*Give seed funding to Women's Veterans Network Australia for recognition of female veterans—they'll get on with it.*

*Thank you everyone for opening up and sharing your raw experiences. Stories like these make you remember you're not alone.*

*National women veteran conferences specific to female issues.*

*Need professional advocates and proactive promotion of female veterans.*

*Co-ordinate all ESO veteran activities together, and all State and Federal veteran legislation and activities.*

*Looking forward to the release of My Service. Thank you.*

*I think it is so important to respect rather than question a veteran's service and the significant role of female veterans' contribution.*

*Women empowering each other is the strongest support.*

*Thanks for giving me the opportunity for attending the second Female Veterans' Policy Forum. I feel we have moved forward since the first one and continue to do so.*

Invitations should go out to all  
650's and every year it should  
be new voices so far then  
covering more issues + real life  
lived Experience.

Continue to involve and  
empower women veterans  
to enable a voice,  
strength and unity  
throughout development.

Very engaging and  
rewarding forum  
- THANK YOU!  
Loved The Shark  
Tank!

Give seed funding to  
WVNA for recognition  
of female Veterans  
they'll get on with it.

Very productive  
Forum, So glad  
I could be a  
part of it.

Need Professional Advisors  
& pro-active promotion  
of female Veterans

Women empowering  
each other is the  
strongest support.

Thank you everyone for  
opening up & sharing your  
raw stories & experiences.  
Stories like these make you  
remember you're not  
alone. x

*Continue to involve and empower women veterans to enable a voice, strength and unity throughout development.*

*The issues raised today affect everyone who has served, but the ones who are invisible are the part-time veterans. As more of them deploy this group will increase, there is no transition for them. Has anyone thought about the health implications?*

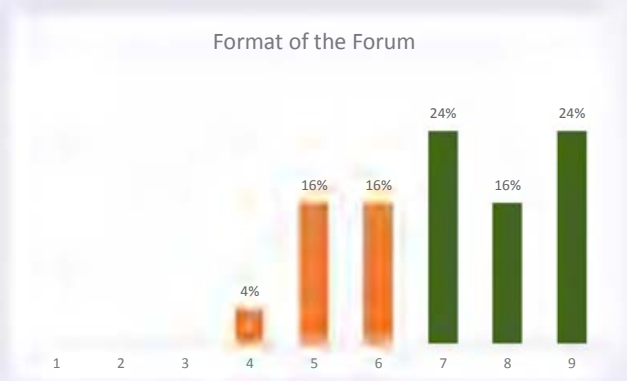
*Very productive forum, so glad I could be a part of it.*

*Change will only happen if and when a cultural mindset changes. Education towards cultural change within Defence and the community is a long-term effect.*

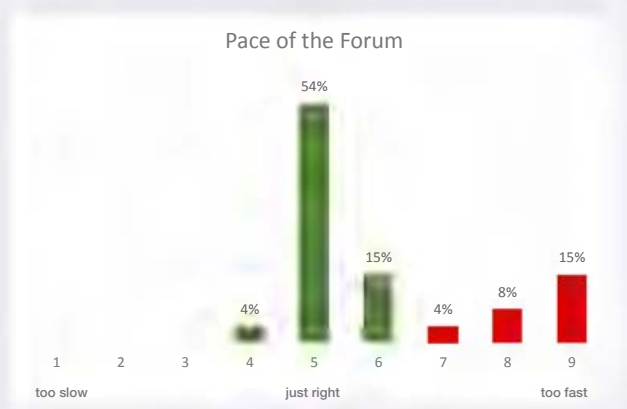
*Very engaging and rewarding forum—thank you! Loved the Shark Tank!*

# EVALUATION

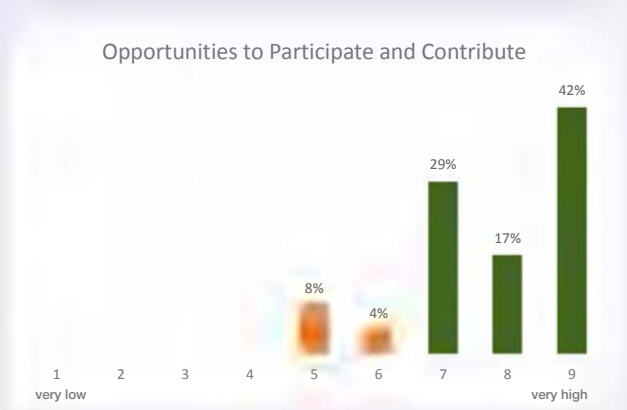
Overall participants were very positive about the Forum's format.



Most participants thought the pace of the Forum was 'about right', but 27% of participants considered the pace was too fast.



Most participants thought they had an opportunity to participate and contribute during the Forum.



100% of the participants considered the Forum to be a worthwhile use of their time.

## CLOSE

Ms Liz Cosson closed the second meeting of the Female Veterans Policy Forum by reflecting to participants their presentations contained many clear and tangible recommendations that DVA could implement. She thanked participants for their contribution and hard work.

Ms Cosson asked that the participants continue to stay engaged with DVA to help co-design these ideas.







