

Women Veterans

POLICY FORUM 2024

REPORT



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	5
OBJECTIVES	5
THIS REPORT	5
ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS	6
STRUCTURE OF THE FORUM	7
WELCOME BY DVA LEADERSHIP	8
Secretary's Address	8
Opening Remarks	10
Royal Commission Update	10
POLICY CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS	12
Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy	12
MyService and the Digital Experience	14
Public Participation at DVA	16
Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality	18
Wildcard Topic: Regulation of Ex-Service Organisations	20
PARTICIPANT-LED CONTENT	21
What's Changed in the Women Veteran Community? – Environmental Scanning Activity	21
Community Initiatives Presentations	24
FINAL COMMENTS	32
FORUM EVALUATION	33

The Department of Veterans' Affairs would like to thank the participants of the 2024 Women Veterans Policy Forum for the perspectives, ideas and experiences they shared, their courage to do so, and their ongoing contributions to the Defence, veteran and veteran families communities.

All the graphic recording illustrations in this report were captured during session at the Women Veterans Policy Forum 2024.



HOPE for
the FUTURE

WE HAVE the
POWER in this
ROOM

I FELT
SAFE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Women Veterans Policy Forum was established in 2016 to provide a platform for women veterans to raise issues directly with the Australian Government and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), and to create new channels of communication between DVA and the veteran community.

The Forum is one way the Government and DVA are listening to women veterans and using their feedback to co-design future policy and program options.

Aspects of the Forum change every year, including the topics, structure, objectives, and participants.

THE 2024 EVENT

For the 2024 event, an open expression of interest (EOI) process was conducted. Promoted on social media and through established networks in the veteran community, the EOI garnered considerable interest across the veteran community. Over half of the forty-four women veterans who attended the Forum were new to the event. Considered selection of participants helps to ensure the Forum remains representative of the diverse Australian veteran community and includes participants who can contribute in a fast-paced and solutions-focused collaborative design environment.

Senior leaders from DVA and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) attended to hear first-hand from women veterans. In 2024, this included Defence Personnel, DVA Secretary Alison Frame, and representatives from the ADF Joint Transition Authority and Office for Women (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet).

THE PANEL PRESENTATION

Day two of the Forum culminated in a presentation by participants to senior representatives from DVA and the ADF, including DVA Deputy Secretaries Ms Alison McLaren, Mr Andrew Kefford, Kaarin Kooij Director General, Joint Transition Authority and Repatriation Commissioner, Kahlil Fegan .

Participants presented on five topics:

1. Draft Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy;
2. MyService and the Digital Experience;
3. Public Participation at DVA and
4. Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality.
5. Regulation of Ex-Service Organisations

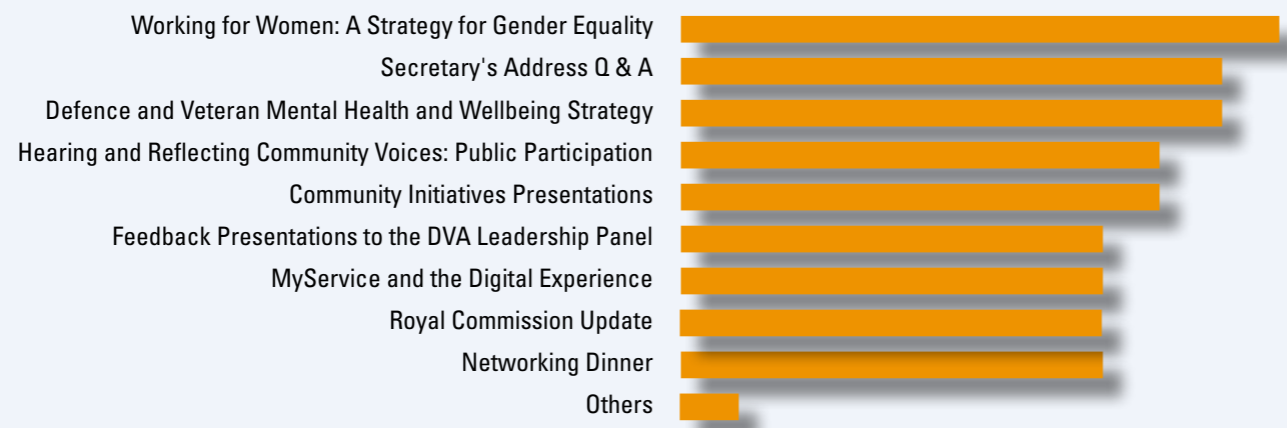
the
POSITIVE
RESPONSE
from the PANEL

The Forum generated a broad range of suggestions including:

- **Streamlining Access:** Creating a centralised hub for veterans to easily access health and mental health services.
- **Leveraging Successful Programs:** Adapt and expand effective models to meet regional needs.
- **Veteran Insights:** Gather feedback from veterans and ADF personnel to improve support services.
- **Evidence-Based Approaches:** Use data and research to drive better outcomes for veterans, including joint studies by Defence and DVA.
- **Training for Veteran Community groups:** Educate Ex-Service Organisations on effective data collection, including gender-specific information.
- **Focus on Women Veterans:** Support research specifically aimed at women veterans and understanding their specific experiences and needs.
- **Improve State and Federal Coordination:** Develop state-specific veteran support strategies with federal support, more consistency in service provision across states/territories.
- **Alternative Therapy Research:** Promote studies on the effectiveness of alternative therapies to build a strong evidence base for future decisions.
- **Early Transition Preparation:** Start transition early, involving families and focussing on overall wellness.
- **Improved Communication and Support:** Enhance the claims process, ensure timely payments, and strengthen DVA presence through community hubs and digital platforms.
- **A Peak Body for Ex-Service Organisations:** Establish an Ex-Service Organisation peak body within DVA to regulate Ex-Service Organisation activities oversee compliance.

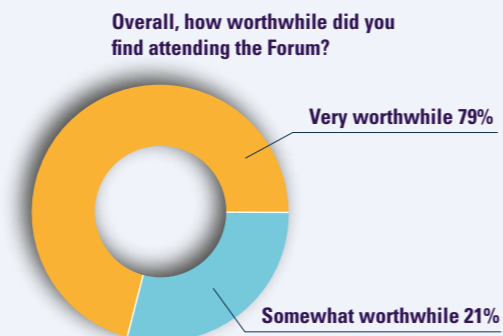
Further details on the discussions and suggestions generated through this activity are included in the body of this report.

WHICH SESSIONS DID YOU FIND MOST VALUABLE



DVA has consistently received very positive feedback on the Forum.

DVA thanks the 2024 Forum participants for the insight, energy, and passion they brought to this important event.



INTRODUCTION

The *Women Veterans Policy Forum* convened over 15–16 May, in Canberra. This engagement saw forty-four (44) women veterans join the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to explore their unique perspectives on some of the key issues facing their community.

The Forum leverages the lived experiences of women veterans of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), to inform future DVA policy and service delivery options. The Forum provides a platform for the voices of these communities to be heard, and a space for meaningful networks to be fostered.

The feedback and ideas generated at the Forum will play a pivotal role in informing strategic decision-making and enhancing the quality of DVA's initiatives.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Forum in 2024 were to:

- Renew the group and foster an engaged network of women veterans;
- Leverage the group's knowledge and lived experience to:
 - Shape thinking on areas of policy consideration now and in the future, including women veteran specific health needs and health system interactions;
 - Contribute to the action planning of specific activities and initiatives including the joint *Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*;
 - Inform areas of improvement on the user experience of MyService; and
 - Inform effective ways to implement the *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality* goals for the veteran community.
- Support a shared understanding of the veteran landscape through DVA and participant-led sessions.
- Develop a robust network of women veterans.

THIS REPORT

This report provides a high-level overview of the feedback and ideas shared, including de-identified and verbatim quotes captured through both notetaking and video recording. Where specific community members provided presentations at the Forum about their work or their organisations, these quotes are identifiable within this report.

Direct quotes from Forum participants are denoted by the use of quotation marks (") and italics. The remaining content serves as a condensed representation of the diverse ideas and discussions that took place during the event.

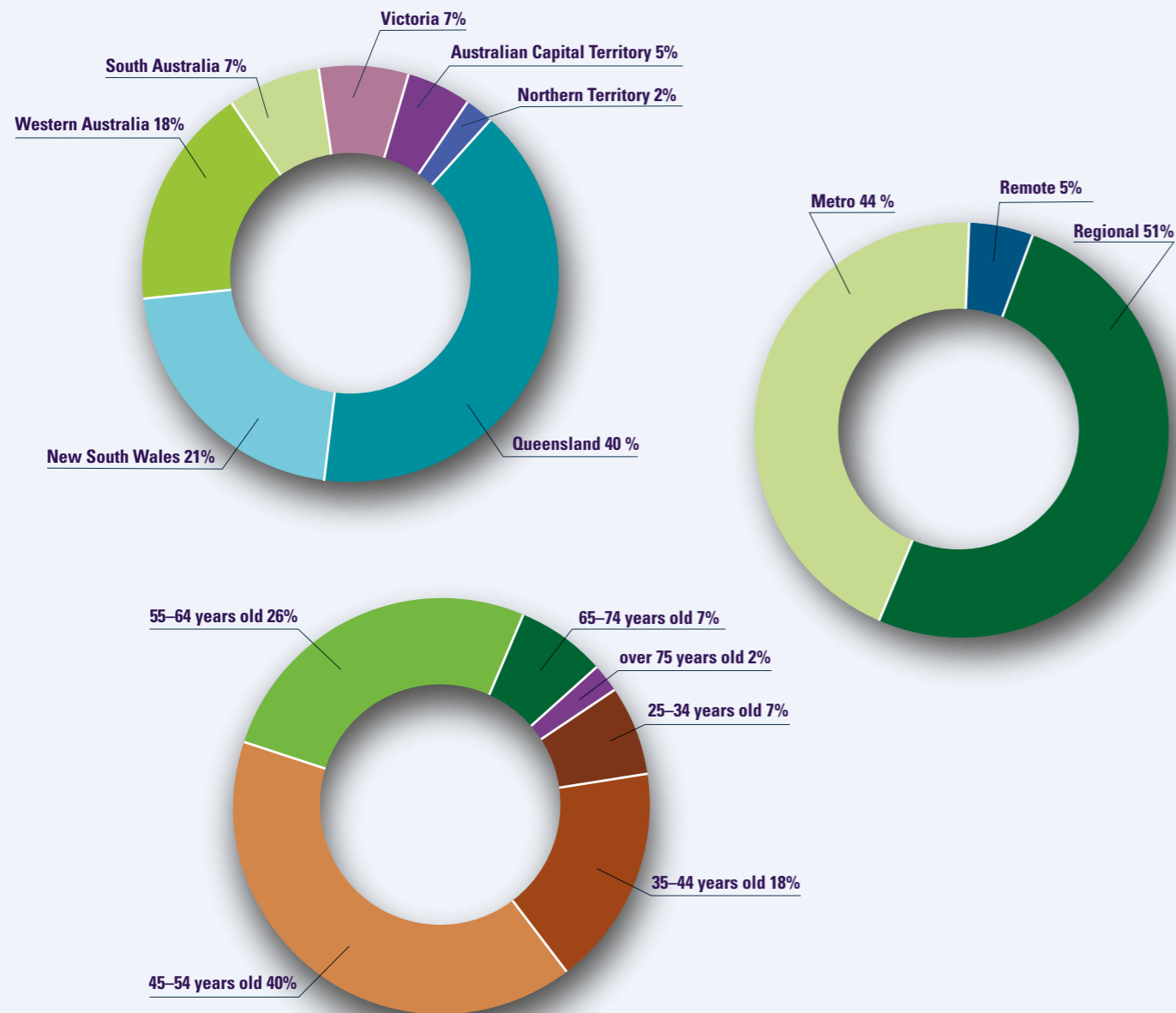
ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

"First of all, I want to say how amazing it is that I know only one person in this room. It gives me a lot of inspiration in the fact that there are a lot of women being given a seat at the table that may have not had one before".

In 2024, forty-four women veterans attended the Forum, of which 60% were new participants that had never attended a previous Forum. These women had a diverse range of lived experience, with one major thing in common; they had all served in the ADF.

Participants were drawn from across Australia, with representatives from almost every state and territory. The most prominent representation was from Queensland and New South Wales. Participants were from, in percentage order, regional, metropolitan and remote areas.

The Forum capture diverse perspectives and experiences by including participants of various ages. The majority of participants were aged between 45 and 64, 24% were 44 years or below, and 9% were 65 years or over.



STRUCTURE OF THE FORUM

The Forum is designed to be highly participative, and solutions focused, with participants engaging in a range of collaborative activities and discussion topics. For 2024, this comprised of the following types of activities:

1. Presentations by DVA Leadership;
2. Policy Challenges and Developing Solutions; and
3. Participant-Led Content.



OPENING REMARKS

Ms Alison McLaren

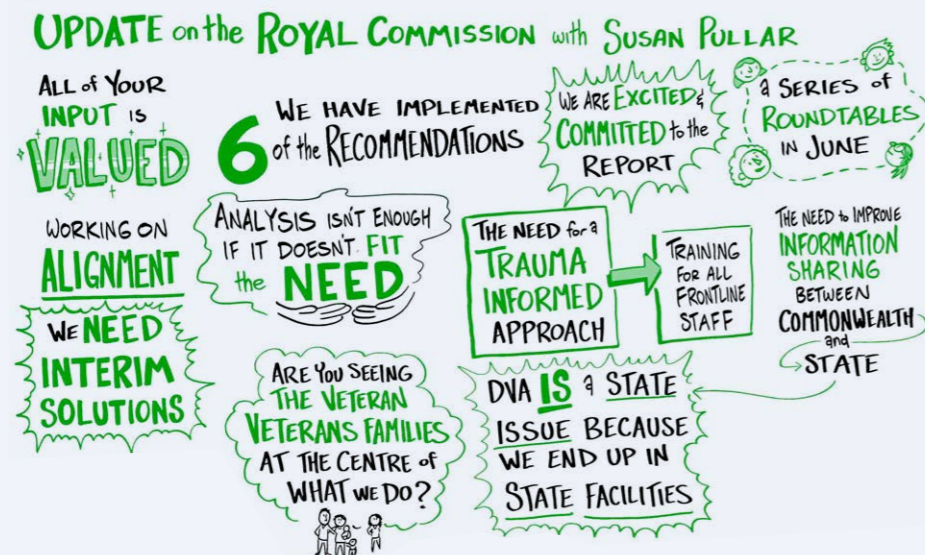
Deputy Secretary, Veteran, Family & Stakeholder Experience Group

The Deputy Secretary, Alison McLaren, extended a warm welcome to all participants.

Key messages delivered by the Deputy Secretary included:

- The importance of connecting and understanding each other within the veteran community and using this Forum as an opportunity for greater depth of discussion with an emphasis on keeping the conversation strategic and policy focused.
- Acknowledgement of the unique experiences of veterans and emphasising the need for better understanding to enhance the support system of the veteran community.

ROYAL COMMISSION UPDATE



Susan Pullar

Assistant Secretary, Royal Commission Reviews and Inquiries

The Assistant Secretary, Royal Commission Reviews and Inquiries, Susan Pullar provided an update on the Royal Commission.

Key messages delivered by the Ms Pullar included:

- The *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* has been ongoing since 2021 with an interim report released in August 2023.
- An update on the implementation of recommendations was provided with six completed and several other recommendations in the process of being implemented.
- The Department continues to support the work of the Royal Commission and is currently responding to on-going requests for information.
- A *Thematic Analysis and Review—Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* was outlined to participants about the key themes Defence and DVA need to focus on, this included but is not limited to; veteran support eco-system, transition, claims processing, health and wellbeing supports.



POLICY CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS

The Forum focused on developing solutions to contemporary policy challenges. The Forum leveraged the expertise of individuals with lived experiences in Defence, veteran, and veteran family life to generate unique insights and potential solutions.

Participants engaged in discussions around four main topics identified as crucial for DVA and the women veteran community in 2024:

1. Draft Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy;
2. MyService and the Digital Experience;
3. Public Participation at DVA; and
4. Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality.

Over the course of two-days, attendees explored these topics with guidance from DVA facilitators and senior leaders. The Forum concluded with a Feedback Panel Presentations session, which provided an opportunity for participants to share their key ideas and insights to senior officials from DVA and Defence.

DEFENCE AND VETERAN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

The draft joint *Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* (the Strategy), defines a shared vision of Defence members, veterans and families to be empowered and supported to optimise mental health and wellbeing in service, throughout the journey into civilian life, and beyond. The draft Strategy sets out a path to make progress towards this vision over the next 5 years, with a focus on five Goals:

1. Promote and assist wellbeing;
2. Improve mental health and wellbeing through prevention and early intervention;
3. Facilitate timely access to quality care and support;
4. Use high quality evidence and data to drive positive outcomes;
5. Grow a positive and connected Defence and veteran community.

The Strategy will be supported by Action Plans to guide the implementation of new initiatives and will include both distinct and joint actions for Defence and DVA. It will be a living document and will be reviewed regularly throughout the Strategy's implementation (2024–2029).



Participants highlighted the following as important considerations in the Strategy:

Data Collection and Research:

"A positive way to start is we start engaging and re-engaging with our veteran community as they come into Defence, where we have the ability to provide them with just one form that says, 'Do you consent to provide information in order for us to collect information for surveys?' That's going to lead us to understand [the questions of] what's working for you? What's not working for you? What you feel or believe should or should not continue? And what factors you attribute to being healthy and having a thriving career?"

"Adding the surveys to our serving Defence Forces and to our veterans through a DVA portal to ask them if they're okay with us contacting them or to be involved in research, that gives us the ability to not only know where our veterans are serving currently, but also where all of our current serving veterans are, and where all of our veterans are spaced around Australia."

"Funding needs to be targeted at what the needs are, which is why it's so important to speak to our community to find out what the needs are, so that we can focus the research in that area and get funding focussed in that area. So, if we need research into female veteran health issues, that funding needs to be targeted towards female health issues and our female veterans need to be part of that research project."

Public Awareness:

"[It is important] we put it out there into the community that not all veterans are broken. Broken is not a good word. Yes, we have needs, and women have different needs...but it's important we get the positivity out there and public awareness of what a veteran is."

Training and Resources:

"We need resources that are a one-stop-shop. They are in a centralised hub, whether that comes through the DVA, and MyService, somewhere we can go to find information and the amazing resources which exist already, rather than dialling the Lifeline number because your life is in crisis."

"Training from the beginning, from the leadership down to the bottom, and make everybody accountable to stick to what that is. There's no good having these policies and procedures if everybody who is responsible for it, is not held accountable to that."

Role of Medical Professionals:

"We need to focus on ability, not disability. The catchphrase is 'don't diss my disability'. Well, why don't we change the Impairment Assessment? Just change the name to a 'Capability Assessment'? That changes the whole focus."

"Doctors and clinicians don't get any information about veterans' health and culture. We need to deliver that...And, I'd love it to be in med school...we need to also focus on [educating] clinicians. Veteran health can be up and down. Wellness is up and down. It's a bit like waves, sometimes they are good, sometimes they bad. And sometimes it's okay to not be okay."

MYSERVICE AND THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

The Channel Strategy & User Experience Section within the Chief Information Officer (CIO) Branch is engaging in an extensive series of co-design and consultation work to improve the user experience of MyService and, encourage those who otherwise have not used the MyService platform to share why this is the case, and what could be done to further encourage user uptake.

There is interest within DVA to explore both current state improvements to MyService specifically, and future state vision for how veterans connect with DVA in a digital environment.

Forum participants were then asked to consider two questions to draw out what the group's perspectives were regarding how DVA's digital service offerings could be improved. These questions were:

1. Are there examples of online services or ways to access information digitally which you consider 'world class'? What should be replicated; and
2. Imagine: In 5 years, DVA's online service and presence meets all the digital expectations of the veteran community. What would this look like?

"We will preface by saying that we acknowledge that DVA has come a long way in terms of the digital experience, from when I submitted my claims nine years ago as paper based. So, for the fact, that alone has changed that it is much easier and a much better system. We acknowledge the fact that DVA has nearly 350,000 clients to service and this aspect of their business is key to that success and the support of the veteran."

MyService

"First of all, we'd like to talk about what's working well... We know one of the great things about MyService is that it's not the only way we can contact DVA. So, we've still got the option either to work through MyService or pick up a telephone and have that human interaction, so we appreciate the opportunity of choosing which method we'll use."

"One of the things we noticed is not everybody is aware of MyService. There were quite a few people in the room that still didn't know it existed, and then there was some in the room that went 'oh, actually that's what I've been using', so they didn't know it by name."

"Not working so well—it's a very simple and very basic interface. It's not very exciting to get in to. You open it up and it is quite boring, and we compared it with a few other apps, and unfortunately, it didn't rank very highly in user experience."

"And also educate [people] on MyService. There were quite a few people that didn't know about MyService, so to get out there, educate them, and explain what we can do: 'You know, you can put your claims in there'."

"The other thing that was great is we can have our advocates lodge things on our behalf if that's what we choose as well. So that was a positive thing. But more education getting out there and showing us what we can do with the app because, not all of us have the time to sit there and figure it out by ourselves. Some user-friendly things would be amazing."



Future State Ideas

"The first one, trauma-informed and human-centred design it's something that we really need to call out, especially when we look at the female veteran experience. So, placing the veteran in the centre and recognising that veterans' needs are different to, maybe, someone who's accessing other health services that are available by the Australian Government, and how does that translate to our user experience? So, for example, does that look like having a crisis button? Because we know that when a veteran using the MyService app is going to be more likely to perhaps need that, than someone accessing the Medicare App. So, by putting the veteran at the centre, rather than the software solution, or the hardware solution at the centre, we're going to get a better outcome for veterans."

"So, if that's the 'what' and 'so what', this is the 'what next?'... We've come up with a framework of some design principles for you."

"Every digital transformation from 2020 onwards has to centre artificial intelligence and look at the opportunities and risks that come with using that. DVA is no different and we must go at the pace of the Australian Government. We recognise that there is a lot of constraint around how innovative we can be, when we are Australian Government body. But what if, imagine if in five years' time, DVA was the leading Department in being adaptable and agile in providing digital solutions to their clients. Why can't DVA be the ones leading? And that starts with right now, getting on top of what can we do in the artificial intelligence machine learning space? We know that almost everyone is going to put a tinnitus claim in. We know that if you streamline the approval process of that, what if we could automate that with some simple algorithmic rules?"

"The third piece is controlling digital presence. So, this is everything outside of what we control internally, which is the MyService and the associated services that wrap around that. This is bigger than MyService, this is controlling the brand narrative. There is an opportunity and a need for DVA to reclaim that, and to reclaim that quickly and control that digital presence, especially with the [Royal Commission's] Final Report coming out next year. You need to make sure you are in control of the narrative that's being put out. There are several different ways to do that. It's also going to have a lead all the way back to recruitment, because if someone on the street knows that they can join Defence, they can have an amazing career, and if, in the hopefully unlikely event that they need a bit of help at the end of their service, that DVA is there and it's going to support them. That's going to have direct recruitment benefits, and we know that they need all the help they can get at the moment. I think it would be awesome if DVA can have a solution right back for Defence careers."

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AT DVA

In 2024, DVA is introducing a new *Veteran, Family & Stakeholder Engagement Strategy* which aims to promote a structured and consistent approach to engaging with the veteran community for the purpose of informing how we design, develop, and adapt DVA programs, services, and policies. Concurrently, work is underway to refresh the *Strategic Research Framework* and develop a *Lived Experience Framework*.

Consideration was given to how DVA uses formal and informal mechanisms to generate, reflect and integrate the perspectives of our diverse community. Structured engagement plays a role in building greater communication, trust, and transparency with the community.

The increasing value placed on public participation at DVA is underpinned by the understanding that the lived experience of serving and ex-serving members of the Australian Defence Force and their families is unique in Australian society, and therefore DVA's approaches must be similarly unique.

For this session, Forum participants were asked to consider the three overarching pillars of public participation at DVA.

The three working groups were:

- Share;
- Exchange of Ideas (Consult, Involve, Collaborate); and
- Research.

Share

"There's actually a massive, massive opportunity for DVA."

"Mondays on social media might be all about 'wellness and opportunities' with ESOs (Ex-Service Organisations). Tuesdays might be all about 'Policy Change and Entitlements you might know about'. There's a storytelling that you can take control of that does not exist now via emails sporadically."

"It is a chance to be seen as receiving feedback, responding to feedback, taking individual concerns offline and solving them, and starting to earn some trust back. It is an entirely transparent way of communicating with your entire community, where you can also control things like, how you share your positive stories."

Exchange of Ideas

"We're all here as part of this Forum that's engaging with female veterans, but we're also part of the public."

"This Forum, for example, meets once a year. Quite a few people suggested that all of us get together again virtually and discuss some of the things that we talked about over the last couple of days and what we have gone back and done with our ESOs (Ex-Service Organisations) and in our community. How we can report back to each other and have that to report back to DVA, as something that's sort of ongoing, if that's possible?"

"Each state should have their own strategy that they work towards or work with, to deliver these outcomes. DVA and the federal government needs to influence or provide some kind of funding, because veterans are a federal asset. So, the funding, because states may not consider it a priority, is very limited."

Research

"Women's specific health needs and this includes the LGBTQIA+ community."

"There needed to be more representation of women's lived experience and that includes positive and negative experiences, because there's so much, we can learn from the positive experiences about what is going well and what other the protective factors are for people who have a positive outcome or experience in defence, in transition and post Defence service."

"Ways that could occur and finding ways for researchers in general to actually engage with women who are willing to share a positive story."



WORKING FOR WOMEN: A STRATEGY FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality (the Strategy) was released by the Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet on 7 March 2024. The Strategy outlines the Australian Government's vision for gender equality: an Australia where people are safe, treated with respect, have choices, and have access to resources and equal outcomes no matter their gender.

It provides a framework for the Australian Government to drive gender equality through its policies and programs and is underpinned by Australia's longstanding international commitments to human rights and gender equality. The Strategy sets out a path to make progress towards this vision over the next 10 years, with a focus on five priority areas:

1. Gender-based violence;
2. Unpaid and paid care;
3. Economic equality and security;
4. Health; and
5. Leadership, representation and decision-making.

This Strategy was informed by the voices of thousands of people and groups from across Australia including women's advocacy groups, businesses, unions, and civil society.

Forum participants were asked to individually reflect on the Strategy overall. Participants were then asked to consider the five Priority Areas of the Strategy.

"Under the gender-based violence Priority, we make the following points.

1. *There is a need for trained gender lens personnel within DVA to provide input oversight to all policy and programs.*
2. *The modality and timing of training for domestic family violence [needs to be multi-channelled and diverse].*
3. *There is a need for DVA referral pathways to existing service providers to assist women and men needing support for violence, as well as support for those with past sexual trauma, including input for nuanced services.*

Finally, we note the 2023–2028 Defence Strategy to responding to family and domestic violence, which we're very happy about, and we're also keen to see progress and linkages made to this action plan under the action plans under the Gender Equality Strategy."

"I'm going to talk on economic equality and security. Like most of the female Australian workforce, career gaps are part of most military women veteran's lives. And the implication of those career gaps is particularly significant for us because of the different superannuation systems that we have and the rules around those."

"One of the things that's been touted a lot lately is the Total Workforce System, which is promoted to provide workforce flexibility, but it still creates superannuation poverty for those women that choose to transfer to SERCAT 2, 3 and 5. In a civilian organisation, if you were in their casual workforce, you would be getting superannuation paid on your casual pay. That does not happen for our female reservists."

"There's a need for more economic education. Most women veterans, like most young people particularly, don't understand superannuation entitlements and don't understand how important it's going to be in their future, retirement income. There needs to be a much greater education around women, what these gaps and things do to them, and investment advice and the ADF advice that's currently done through the Financial Services Council is not women-specific enough."

"The fourth topic is on health. So firstly, there's a need for DVA to develop policy, Statement of Principles for female-specific health needs and inclusion of female-specific questions in the Permanent Impairment documentation and/or medical assessment specifically around female-specific musculoskeletal conditions, pregnancy, postpartum and reproductive health."

"Older veterans need recognition in DVA policy, tailored to women, tailored and appropriate support and communications for these older women. What works for younger veterans does not necessarily work for the older ones. I.e. how they access information and technology."

"The other thing we thought DVA could assist with is sponsored leadership courses and learning experiences, on boards and representative positions. If that means holding positions on each board or each level of representation, requiring Ex-Service Organisations to have female leadership positions filled to get grants, that sort of thing, then we think that would actually be a good thing, it will help raise the ability for women to get into those leadership and representative positions."

"And lastly, the need for current Australian based research into female veterans and the link between service injuries and ongoing health problems later in life, as well as ongoing education into the awareness of issues which then drives the culture change."



WILDCARD TOPIC: REGULATION OF EX-SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

The 'Wildcard' activity during the Forum allowed participants to bring up pressing issues in the Australian Veteran Community that were not on the Forum agenda. Participants submitted topics they wanted to discuss related to the veteran community.

The group collectively selected the theme they deemed most significant for presentation to the Panel, with 'Regulation of Ex-Service Organisations' emerging as the most favoured topic based on the votes received. Key commentary on this topic included:

"Inside DVA, the Ex-Service Organisation peak body should work to regulate this authority. The Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission is the regulatory authority for charities. You must provide a report to them every year".

"We should also be providing a report to the Ex-Service Organisation peak body to make sure that we keep that Ex-Service Organisation. Whatever that may look like, that should happen. Now, there are several ingredients that you need to be able to be an Ex-Service Organisation and there'll be a list of those things".

"There are also eight categories already that have been agreed on by these 70 organisations that will help you reach that ability to be an Ex-Service Organisation. Some of them are Wellbeing: General, Wellbeing: Housing, Wellbeing: Aged Care and Advocacy etc. To get there, you need to get this going on. For those Ex-Service Organisations that aren't quite there, education and support is what the Ex-Service Organisation peak body will provide so that they can get that tick".

"This is all about collaboration, not competition. Like the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission, there will be three levels; a large organisation, a medium organisation, and a small organisation, because a small surf project down the coast shouldn't have to report the same as the Returned Services League. The bigger you are, the bigger the reporting requirement will be. If you have paid staff, compared to being a volunteer organisation, it should be different again, if you're a CEO taking home \$500,000 a year, you should be giving at least \$5 million to Veterans Assistance in that same year."

"A lot of Ex-Service Organisations aren't charities, and we're not saying that they must be, but they don't get as much. For example, if you're a registered charity with Deductible Gift Recipient status, these all have different things. If you're not a registered charity, just because you're a one-person surf project, doesn't mean you have to go out and get one".

"Transparency: We want to know what they're doing. If enough mud is thrown, it will stick. And we've seen that happen".

"Governance: There will be governance requirements and I have no problem at all, writing a report to the Ex-Service Organisation peak body every year, to prove that I am maintaining my support to the veteran community".

"It must be owned Federally, and it must be fair as well".

"However, there's one big problem. [The term] Ex-Service Organisation does not fit with today. We need a fresh name and a fresh field. We support veterans, we support families, we support current serving, from the day that you sign on the dotted line to the day that you leave [Defence]"

"We're not saying it must be VSO (Veteran Services Organisation) or VSN (Veteran Support Network). Don't come up with a long acronym because that's annoying. I don't mind if it is an acronym, but let's not make it a long one. It desperately needs a fresh field and a fresh name. And we need to get into the 21st century supporting our veterans."

"Out of the Interim Report from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide was talk of an Ex-Service Organisation peak body. There needs to be a regulatory authority for Ex-Service Organisations."

PARTICIPANT-LED CONTENT

WHAT'S CHANGED IN THE WOMEN VETERAN COMMUNITY? – ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING ACTIVITY

To explore the common themes concerning the community, participants engaged in an environmental scanning activity: *What's Changed in the Women Veterans Community?*

Participants were asked to identify and categorise changes in the women veterans community over the preceding 12 months into three groups:

1. Things that haven't changed (remaining static or where change is desired but not forthcoming);
2. Things in progress (ongoing developments or changes that are currently being implemented); and
3. Things that have changed (positive transformations or finalised developments).

The goal was to gather insights and understand common themes or concerns found in the women veteran community. An overview on the output of this activity is found on the following pages.

Things that have stayed the same...

Claims / Legislation

- Claims processing time.
- Returned & Services League of Australia commitments towards veterans.
- Veteran interpretation of DVA policies and new legislation.

Engagement and Community

- DVA continuing to be open to listening with community-based Forums and commitment to engagement.
- Communication has remained the same to assist with the movement forward of strength and growth.
- Veteran networking has increased support for women making it stronger than ever with forward momentum for change—creating greater space to be heard.
- Resilience and capability of women veterans.
- Barriers to Female Inclusion and Representation
- Lack of female specific Statement of Principles.
- Under representation of women veterans in places advocating change.
- Negative community perceptions towards women and women conditions.

Access to Support

- Lack of regional and remote resourcing and wait times for mental health support.
- Women veteran suicide rates.
- Level of suffering in women veteran cohort.
- Difficulty accessing services, scripts, treatments, and alternate forms of support.

Things in Progress...

Legislation Reform

- Ongoing efforts to streamline and simplify veterans' entitlements legislation.
- Grant processes are continuing to redevelop and educate children about defence and veterans.

Royal Commission

- The Royal Commission is drawing attention to the issues of veterans.

Mental Health – Access and Services

- Improved mental health access for veterans with the ADF mental health and wellbeing branch stand up working with DVA.

Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs)—Working for The Good of The Community

- Collaboration and networking between ESOs and government is being emphasised to work for the good of the veteran community.
- Possible establishment of an ESO peak body for accountability.
- Increase in women veterans stepping into ESO roles.
- Improved access and support for younger veterans.

Community Involvement

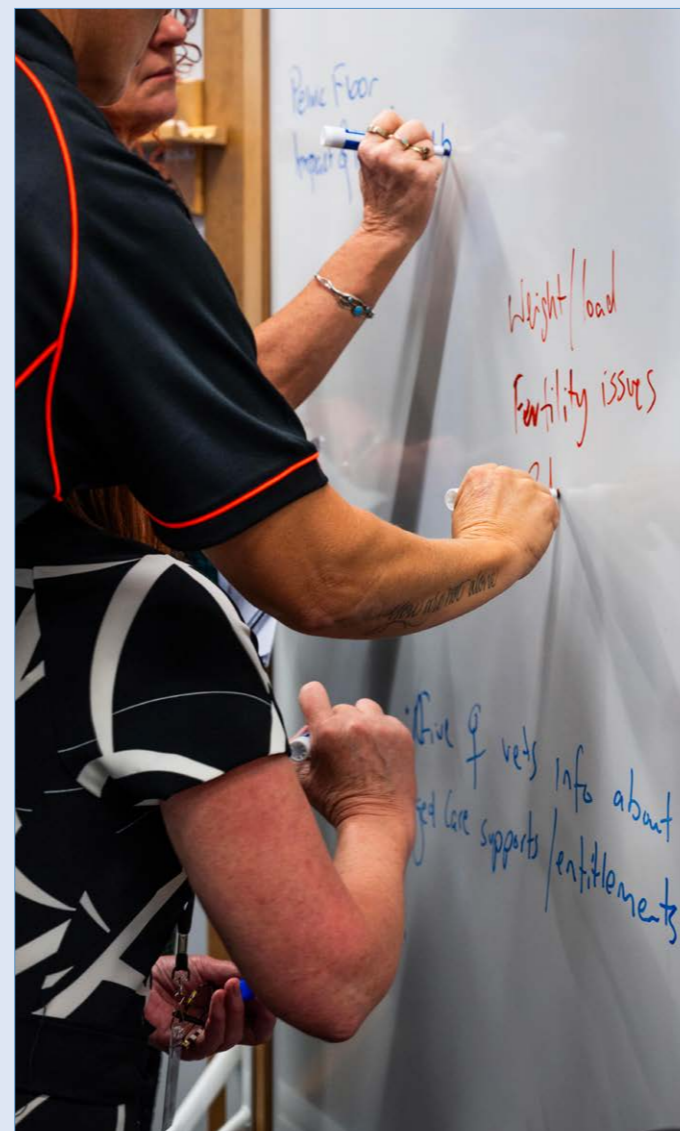
- Development of Veterans' and Families' hubs
- Hubs as a voice for regional issues with improved access to support regional towns and veterans of all ages.
- More veterans are coming together to make more of an impact to the veteran community and support of each other.

Recognition

- The understanding and visibility of the effect and impact of war and service on women veterans particularly on pregnancy and young families.
- Adjustment and acknowledgement of services to recognise the needs of the contemporary veteran women.

Research

- Veteran led research exploring women veterans' experience of ADF as gendered institution.
- Data on women veterans through DVA research is expanding.



Things that have changed...

Recognition and Acknowledgement of Women Veterans

- Increased visibility of women veterans in Returned & Services League of Australia, Congress, boards, and events in senior leadership roles.
- Qualitative research exploring experiences of women veterans.
- Acknowledgement on Anzac Day that women are veterans.
- More recognition to specific service-related injuries and services required for women.
- Acknowledgment of LGBTQIA+ community.

Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs)—Modernisation

- ESO access, support and collaboration has grown to empower modernisation for veteran care and bring together the community.

Increased Community / Engagement

- Increased communication from DVA to veteran community with more accessible information and access to DVA delegates.
- Increased engagement from DVA in explaining procedures, initiatives, and updates.
- The inclusion of new voices expanding the demographic for engagement—a positive move that allows for better representation from and for different groups.
- Focus on the needs of veterans' families including children
- There is a movement towards greater recognition of the impact to veteran families and the required support within schools.

DVA Specific Improvements

- More support and attention is being provided to transitioning veterans.
- Considerations have been seen to make legislation easier to understand with quicker claims processing and access.
- More welfare benefits have been identified within DVA and being actioned locally.



Community Initiatives Presentations

The Community Initiatives Presentations provided an opportunity for women veteran participants to present to DVA and their peers. These presentations explored what the presenter and/or their organisation is delivering to support the Defence, veteran, and veteran family communities.

A summary of each presentation is presented below and on the following pages. This is shown in the form of verbatim quotes, however not all points raised in these presentations are reported for brevity.

Karyn Hinder Working Spirit

"Our mission is to facilitate and support the transition into meaningful employment for veterans through the Transition Employment Portal developed in 2021 and funded by state government."

"Since 2016, we have found employment for over 380 veterans."

"Our approach is if a current serving member is thinking about transition, let's have a job summit where they can come along and enquire. All the employers are supportive of hiring veterans, their families and emergency responders."

"We also have 'WoVEN', which is our Women's Veteran Employment Network, this focuses on especially those who want to work limited hours or are medically transition personnel."

"One case, we had a Navy female who was getting out medically, and we put her in with a mining company. She had a big learning and development background and they said, 'we can take you for five days.' In those five days they linked in with her knowledge from the ADF and she had the best experience. At the end I said, 'how did you find it?' and she said, 'I'm so glad I had the opportunity to do this program but I'm not ready for work. If I didn't do this work experience program, I would have relied more on the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Now I know I've got to concentrate on my medical support before I can gain employment'."

"The young veterans think of it like Tinder for dating but it's a job employment portal where you get a job interview instead of a date."

"It goes beyond job hunting. We also do a networking through the TP (Transition Portal) and companies can advertise (roles). We now include families, broken into two categories, 15 to 17 and 18 plus."

Joanne Beavis iREST Guided Meditation

"Richard Miller, developed iRest in 2006."

"The States have done research programs with veterans who are studying, and overall, for those veterans who are studying, their pass rates went up, and they had less dropouts and everything improved from the benefits of meditation."

"They now researching preventative measures on how we can use this in basic training to stop the big crash in mental health?"

Charlotte Webb RSL Lifecare, Veteran Wellbeing

"I've been to a lot of International Women's Day events where I found it wasn't relevant for me as a veteran. We are different, we have different experiences."

"I decided to create my own (event), were the first regionally and remotely in New South Wales to have an International Women's Day event purely for veterans, current and former serving and their female partners."

"I made the event around becoming an agent of change. In our lives as serving or former serving or as a partner of, we don't really get the opportunity to have much of a choice in what we do and how we lead our lives."

"Positively highlight and celebrate the differences in the lives that we lead as female veterans and partners, particularly living regionally, remotely and spotlight census data."

"How do we encourage our cohort to view themselves as effective change makers?"





Natalie Merryman

A study into women veterans' experiences of the Australian Defence Force as a gendered institution

"I've conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 women, and the data is incredible. What people have been able to share with me about their experiences is very meaningful."

"The existing literature does a lot of describing of veterans and that quantitative biomedical sort of explanation doesn't give us a full picture, but it does describe us as vulnerable to a lot of, effects of homelessness, family breakdown, poverty and suicide."

"But not many academics have done much exploration into the lived experience of women, and that includes the positive experiences and what the protective factors are that make a difference between someone's having a great experience, having a good transition, and having not such a great experience."

"The expected outcomes of my overall study is to illuminate issues that are contributing to the continued poor mental health and general outcomes for women veterans, inform interventions that can affect positive change, understand how to enable and increase engagement with, and representation of, women veterans in the veteran community and contribute important insights about gender equity, human rights and international politics as it relates to women and the role of militaries in our society."

"I feel a sense of deep responsibility to do their stories justice and to do that translation that we've also been talking about. This research is not just another study."



Donna Manton

Athena Project—Supporting Veteran Victim-Survivors of Sexual Violence

"The Athena Project's purpose is to support victim-survivors through victim-led support initiatives and by creating a safe space to be seen, heard, and believed. The Project has since grown as a tool for education to the wider Defence and Veteran communities, as well as advocating for policy changes to inform the future of lived experiences for victim-survivors within service."

"Not all people have been through the system and might not know what supports are available, or what things they can and can't do. So, they're looking to try and advocates, have them all around the country when something happens, people can reach out."

"The project is looking at advocacy in terms of; emotional support, information referrals, and providing education around understanding of the ADF and the justice system."

Colleen Maclean

Operation Navigator—Oasis Townsville

"We are one of the Veteran and Family Hubs that was established by DVA. We were the first to launch and now there are seven around Australia"

"Our vision is a thriving, respected, vibrant, well-supported veteran community enhancing the economic and social prosperity of Townsville to provide a single front door for the veteran community."

"Operation Navigator is a Defence funded project working heavily with the Joint Transitional Authority. It has four pillars. We are working on delivering the overarching app that will encompass a place for people to, access services and information through one single place."

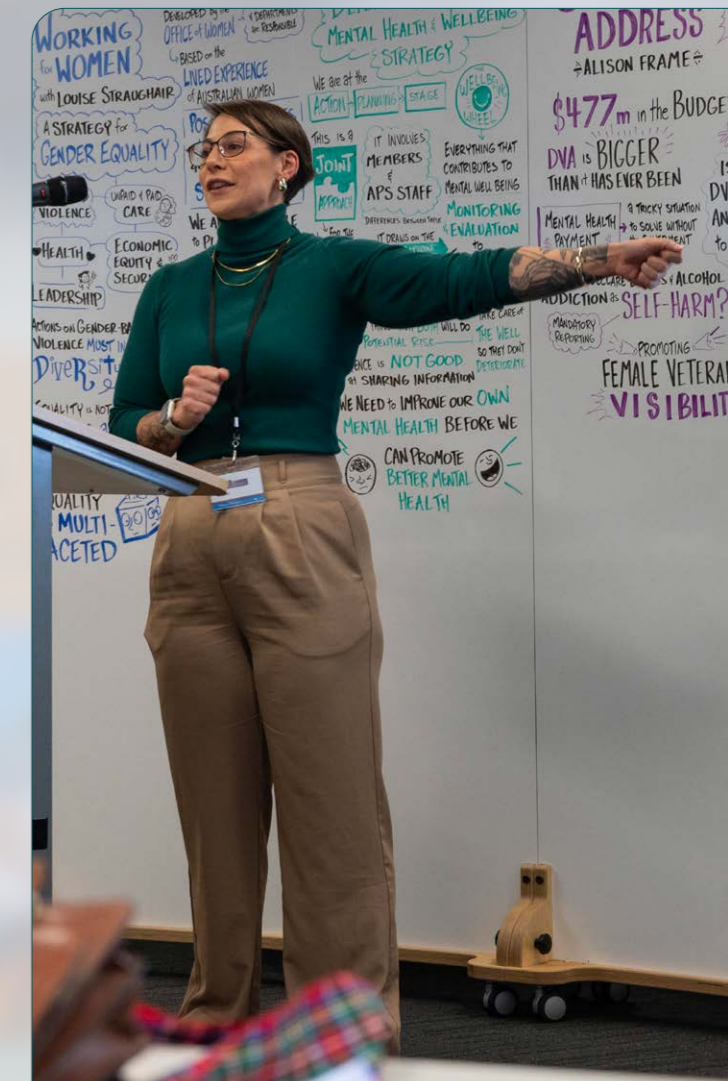
"The Solid Foundations workshop, encompassing three basic concepts of planning early:

1. Plan for your transition from the day that you enter into defence;
2. Diverse network of military and civilian support;
3. Have an interest that is external to defence, which has no tie to the uniform."

"It's facilitated by me and one of our volunteers, Dan, who combined we have 25 years' experience in the ADF, both medically discharged."

"It's a full day directed to current serving ADF members in their first 12 months, post initial employment training in Townsville. It's a pilot program that we're delivering."

"So far, we've run our first block, which we saw eleven participants ranging from people who were six months into their first deployment, all the way through to people who were in the process of transitioning out. We walk them through the ten veteran community needs, linking them in with support networks as well as some self-awareness pieces... We're trying to work with them to think about a holistic plan for their entire life."



Pennie Looker

Service: A Series of Photographic Portraits & Video Interviews with Our Veterans and Loved One

"For Every Drop Shed in Anguish Dedication Ceremony at the Australian War Memorial was a seven-year long project that we'd been working very hard on to make sure that absolutely everybody had a place."

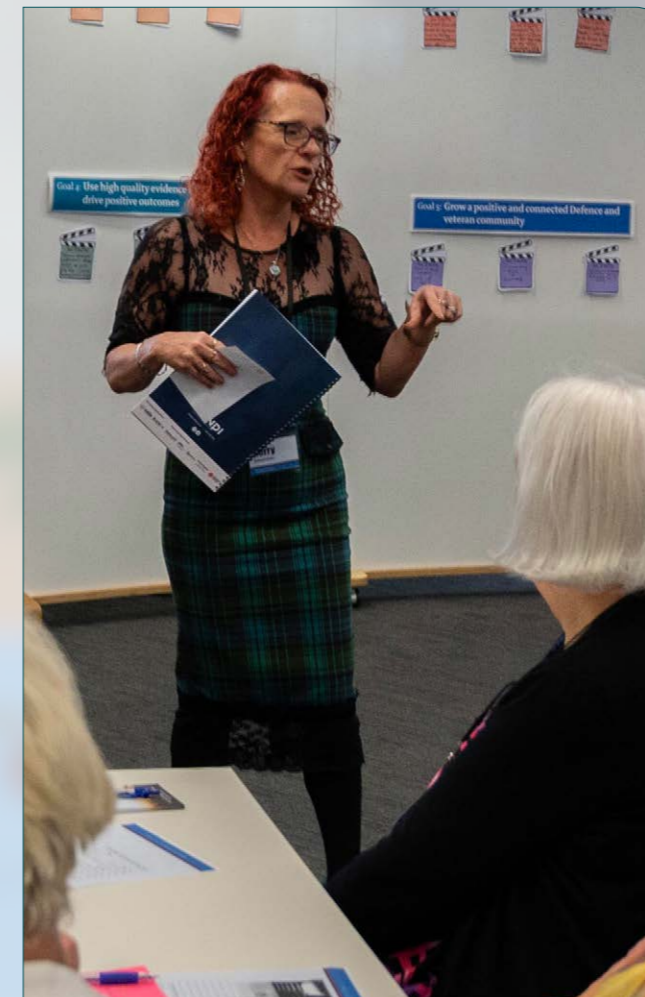
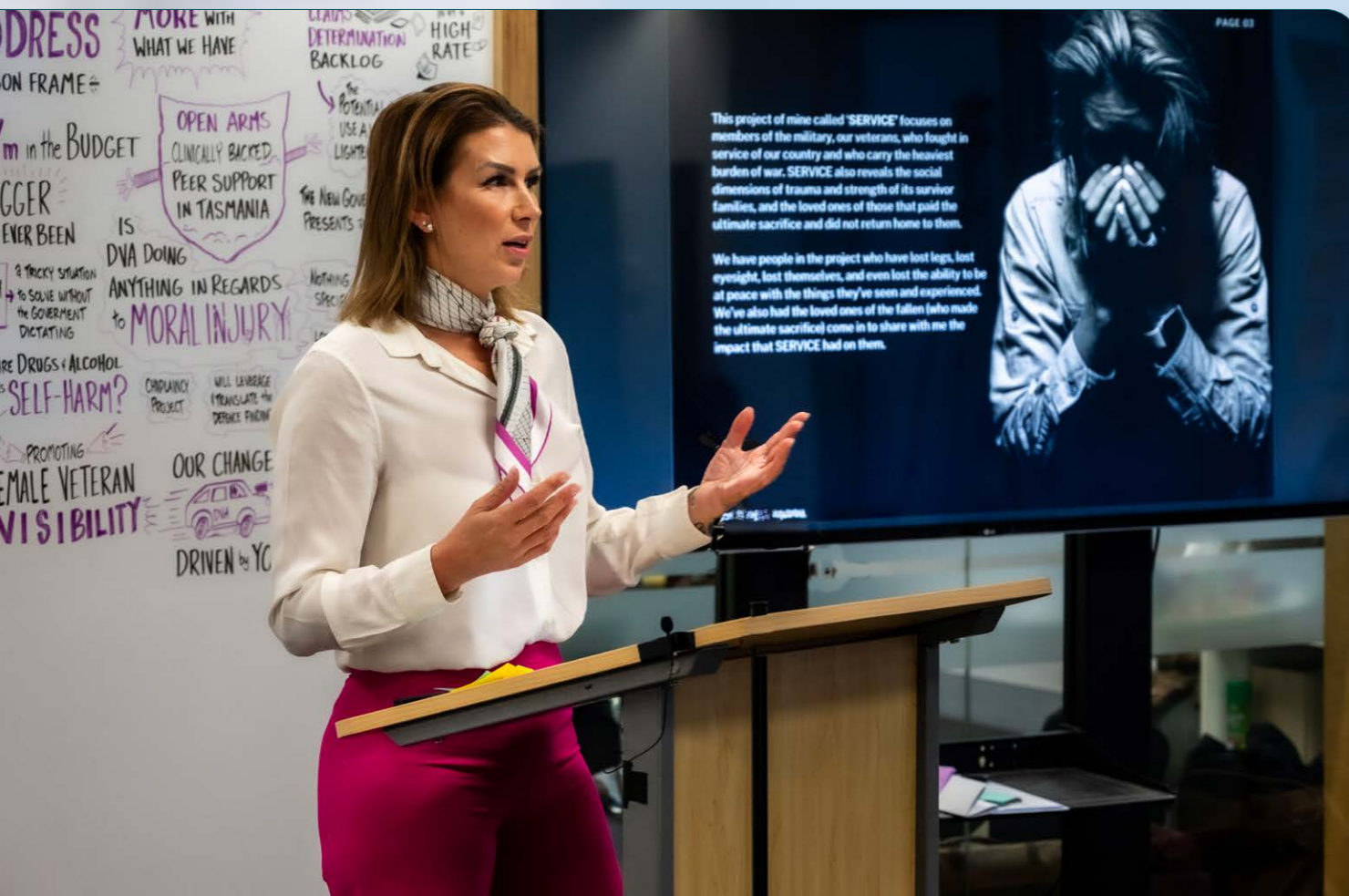
"The aim of this project 'Serve' is to open the eyes on what a veteran is and what service has meant to people, not just as veterans, but to their family members too."

"...Part of this project is including taking photographs of various veterans and family members, as well as doing a video interview to talk about their experiences. It's somewhat light-hearted and goes with a minimalist view of the photographs."

"I've been asked to represent the female veteran, to open the eyes a little bit more on what a female veteran can look like. We're different shapes, sizes, colours—we don't fit one stereotype."

"There will be an opening in August where the people who have been photographed and interviewed will have their first opportunity to see which photos and interview segments have been selected, and they will be there with their family or support person."

"The whole goal of this is to be really simplified and basic, but then see the interviews and find out what this person has been through or done, the things they've seen or what their children have had to witness is huge...It's a beautiful way to dedicate the service that we've all given, and our families have given as well."



Dr Kerry Summerscales

Health after Service: A Systematic Approach to Navigating DVA and Musculoskeletal Health Concerns

"I ended up doing the RSGP future leadership program, and you had to have a project, so my project was to teach doctors about veterans, culture, our health and data literacy."

"I linked in with The Oasis Veterans and Families Hubs, and we did three engagements, and it went down so well—GP's actually want to help you".

"I started talking to them about ADF veterans' culture...I want them to understand about us!"

"(GP's) wanted to know about our culture, I want to explain to them why we are the way we are, which is good and bad, and how ADF life impacts us and our families...I also then teach them the whole transition and talk about the different types."

"I go through cases with them and how to do the referral, we have a whole booklet which goes through everything including correct wording. This contains a whole heap of different modules, including musculoskeletal, psych and female veterans".

"But funding is needed to complete this work!"

Chalisa Pearce

Veterans Backyard – Growing Connections

"Initiative bringing veterans from different service branches together."

"It's a safe space for those who served can reflect, learn a new skill and form lasting friendships."

"The garden was a dumping ground, it's now a special place to connect. We turned this area into a garden that is now tended and cared for by veterans. It is a peaceful and special place".

"The garden offers veterans a collective sense of purpose where they're learning new skills and forming new friendships."

"Painful memories, but also fond ones that are shared in this accepting space. The veteran garden has been so successful in its first six months. There are now plans to expand and very soon there will be plenty more plants, a barbecue and seating area, giving the veterans even more opportunity to connect".

Athenaproject.com.au

Maree Grindrod
Stories for Sisters

"In 2017, I come across a Facebook post from a woman who had decided to publicly grieve her maternal loss by publishing a book. Melissa Devereaux was calling for stories from mothers and women to share their grief in a book, to help with understanding and allowing their loss to be acknowledged. This could be in many ways like miscarriage or stillborn."

"I contributed my story, and the book was published in 2018."

"What I would like to see some form of a storyline come from women from serving, from ex-serving about your past, about your present, about your future. Putting pen to paper and keys to fingerboard and capturing your words and your thoughts on your service... I'd like to see us all tell our stories of our service, and for those stories to be our feelings, our thoughts, our courage, our loss, our strengths, and even our bitterness, our love, our passion, but most importantly, our gift for those coming behind us, serving."

"Here are some examples of women creating change and creating voices and creating their thoughts to help others:

1. Angel of archway—written by a Naval Reserve legal officer from the viewpoint of her partner that had served;
2. Not Now, Not ever;
3. Comfort for the tears."

Kylie James
Veterans' Retreat

"I run Veterans' Retreat, which is located in Mothar Mountain, south of Gympie in southeast Queensland. We run a holistic wellness retreat, equine therapy looking after homeless veterans and we do emergency and respite care as well."

"To date, we've run eight female veteran and first responder retreats".

"We get 20 to 30 women registered at every single one and 90% of the women that come to each retreat a brand new and have never been to the retreat before, which is amazing. So, we've touched over 150 female veterans and first responders in that time."

"In 2021, we provided 364 nights of homeless veteran care. In 2022, 605, and last year, 896 nights of homeless veterans' care at a cost of only \$7,000 and working on getting funding."

"We are 100% volunteer run in our fifth year of operation. We also run a concert once a year, a charity concert to raise funds. It's open to everybody."

"It is a healing space. If you are ready to heal, we are ready to support you. If you are not ready to heal, then we are not the space for you."

"The number of times that people have said that veterans retreat saved their life is amazing."

"I'd like to reiterate that, the reason for your feelings right now and what happened to you is not your fault, but happiness is absolutely your responsibility. You're the only person that can give it to you and that is something that we continue to try and advocate at the retreat. You are the only person that can do that for you, and that's that you're going to be with you for the rest of your life."

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES



FINAL COMMENTS

As the Forum drew to a close, attendees were invited to provide a final comment about the content covered, or an insight about their experience at the 2024 Forum.

The central themes generated from these insights included:

Driving Change and Progress for Women Veterans

"The road to effective change, transformation and hope!"

"This so far is the best Women Veterans Policy Forum. We are finally moving forward."

"It's coming together at last!"

"Equity over equality."

"I feel like all the work I do advocating for women veterans – with this group, I am not alone."

"How can I help?"

Gratitude and Appreciation

"Proud, humble, emotional, inspired – thank you for the opportunity."

"Thank you DVA for opening the space for female veterans to have a voice and contribute to change."

"It is an honour to share the room with so many amazing women veterans, thanks!"

"Best Forum. Productive, happy to be here. We can do it! Awesome, keep engaging and keep this up, so many ideas!"

Collaboration and Unity

"The ideas, engagement and drive you need to make change IN THIS ROOM."

"Amazing women + collaboration (not competition) = great outcomes! Use us more."

"#awareness #collaboration"

"Good to have positive feedback from the panel. Moving forward for women veterans"

Inspiration and Empowerment

"Women are shaping the future!"

"We are all amazing."

"Uplifting, validating, informative."

"What a great Forum for meaningful collaboration of women."

"So happy to be in a room full of like-minded people with us we can create positive change for women."

"Hope for an amazing future."

"Woman-ly. Veteran-ly. Loved!"

FORUM EVALUATION

Participants had the opportunity to complete a Forum Evaluation Survey following their attendance, providing their feedback on their experiences attending these events to inform improvements for future engagement opportunities.

Of the evaluation respondents:

- 100% felt attending the Forum either 'somewhat' or 'very worthwhile'.
- 93% found the topics discussed either 'somewhat' or 'very relevant'.
- when asked to indicate which sessions were most valuable, *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality* scored the highest at 71%.
- 93% felt Respected and Supported.
- 57% of respondents rated the pace of the Forum as 'Just Right'. The remaining 43% rated 'much too fast' and 'somewhat too fast' equally.

"This was my first Forum. I found it to be one of the most professional and organised Forums I have ever attended."

"The Forum was the best yet particularly as we have now divided the families and veterans. I would, however, suggest that there is a little more time to network with other veterans in a Forum space. Didn't get a lot of time between breaks to do so..."

"I think having new additions each year is a good idea. They give fresh opinion to the Forum. Maybe have it over 3 days?"

"This was an excellent Forum. Heather's facilitation was outstanding. As this was my first opportunity to attend, I was impressed with the diversity and knowledge of the women in the room..."







Supporting Veterans and their Families