

Email: legislation.reform@dva.gov.au

27.March.2024

REF: Have Your Say by 28th April 2024 - Proposed Changes to Veteran's Compensation and Rehabilitation Legislation

To whom it may concern,

As a Veteran currently going through the Department of Veterans Affairs claiming and rehabilitation process, and as the Wife of a Veteran who is under rehabilitation, I completely agree with the proposal that a simpler process is required and that an overhaul is required to bring in new strategies to save lives!

My husband and I weren't issued with DVA White Cards during our discharge process from the Army over 2 decades ago, and as such have never known the amount of care and services available, or received any assistance during this time. Until being forced to seek help under extremely painful, physical and mental complex health issues that have been building to a boiling point in our personal and professional lives over the years. We now have some of the care we need, however, it is an on-going stressful process, after a period of just over two years we are still required to "give more information", "acquire up-to-date referrals", "provide requested medical documentation signed by each specialist in turn" and are constantly trying to find time/a "good mental health day" to sit and go through DVA Paperwork to complete additional claims processes.

I have heard many times from fellow veterans that they would "rather suffer-in-silence than deal with Vet Affairs" and the saying that "DVA is nothing more than an Insurance Company", that DVA will make it difficult to claim to avoid pay outs, and hearing other veterans saying that they have been made to feel like they are trying to "rip-off the system" or that they are dishonest or "making up stuff for the money". The feeling that you will be challenged from the start and the lengthy and painful process you are aware you will face, absolutely affects your mental health in every way.

From the first phone call to DVA, you discover that it is generally accepted that you will be on hold for up to an hour and at times longer, followed by differing information between operators – usually one being more helpful and friendly than another. Next is the 400 days between receiving an Email saying that your Claim has been recognised and approved to being contacted by a Claims Officer saying they have just picked up your application (despite contacting DVA multiple times during this period).

In the mean time you are living in Chronic Pain, with symptoms causing absolute misery, leading to worse symptoms of depression. So now you are required to see a Psychologist for Mental Health Treatment and after breaking open old wounds and speaking about things you swore to yourself you would never talk about (whilst skirting around the things you cannot say) you find yourself a bit of a mess and become ill and need constant days off work and are terrified of asking for more help because of what it's going to do to you. Then you are told that DVA doesn't recognise Psychologists and that you are now required to seek a Psychiatrist and start all over again with the whole mentally harrowing and physically exhausting process with someone else.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] because of treatment required, I have also been unable to retain my employment through this process and now face unforeseen reduced future financial security despite all the work and training I have gone through building myself up to the great career that I had as a Surgical (Perioperative) Theatre Nurse and Emergency On-Call Surgical Response Team Member in my community.

It is no wonder veterans are adverse to seek help; when you have highly trained physicians not wanting to deal with DVA paperwork, and finding it too difficult to complete that they withhold completing forms, cut out parts they don't want to answer and consistently make excuses such as "I have another DVA patient ahead of you, I will do your report when I have finished with theirs" or the "I don't take on DVA Patients" response.

Should there not be a Specific Protocol to follow regarding veterans' 1st Contact and a Flow Chart to simplify the process of seeking help?

The First Contact should be followed by an "Informative Email" to the veteran (or letter) with the steps and requirements for the claims process, with all relevant forms attached. Nothing left out, missing or to become out of date before the end of the process requiring the veteran to re-supply the information again. Assuming once again that a veteran is only seeking help from DVA at somewhat of a last resort, you could also make the assumption that if they have to wait more than 2 months, let alone over a year, that their Biopsychosocial situation is going to become much worse during that period. Not to mention that the veterans Mental Health is most likely compromised and that they will not be capable of working their way through the complex process... if specialist Physicians like Orthopaedic Surgeons and Psychiatrists find the paperwork they are provided with too difficult – what hope does the suffering veteran have of figuring out how to deal with DVA's unhelpful strategies to handling the claims process.

I personally suffer from Anxiety whenever the acronym DVA is mentioned now and felt strongly about replying to the newspaper article referenced. Healing, Mentally and physically is a long process of professional treatment, medications, rest and recovery programs to recharge and avoid relapse. The psychological scars and physical reactions to triggers are permanent and will last a life time at varying degrees, returning to a "normal level of social functioning" within any time period is completely UNREASONABLE.

I believe the following needs to be addressed and have new simplified strategies put in place:

- The time-line from a veterans **1st Contact** to approval of a condition and associated impairments needs immediate repair by increasing staff numbers dramatically e.g. Reduce the phone call and claims application approval time line and increase the effectiveness of the entire process
- More incentives/education for Care Providers to accept and provide professional help to veterans
- The rejection of claims due to miswording by medical professionals should be dealt with by the claims officer - a phone call to the practitioner in question – this should NOT become the job of the veteran themselves and subsequently delay the care required e.g 2 weeks minimum wait to get an appointment with a GP, weeks/months of waiting for specialist appointments and investigative test results, up to a 6 month wait - sometimes more, to find a Psychiatrist who accepts DVA patients within a 200km radius in some areas
- Don't send veterans needing Mental Health support to Social Workers and Psychologists for first-line treatment if you are going to reject their qualifications and in the process delay appropriate life-saving care!
- Address the timeline by specifically reducing the amount of Forms... how many are there in total anyway???
- Run a public media marketing campaign to raise a new state of awareness, specifically addressing the words printed on our DVA Cards = "For what they have done, this we will do" and quash the view that DVA is an Insurance Agency!

Yours Sincerely,

Jean-Maree

