

Department of Veterans Affairs
GPO Box 9998
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To Whom It May Concern

RE Proposed Changes to Veterans' Compensation and Rehabilitation Legislation and Only an Interim Report to date after almost three years.

I write to express concerns and issues regarding the **proposed changes to the Veterans' Compensation and Rehabilitation Legislation and the length of time the Royal Commission has been sitting with only an Interim Report and Draft Legislation to date.**

I note the Royal Commission commenced 8 July 2021 to examine systemic and institutional factors that may impact Defence and Veterans suicide. The Interim Report launched in August 2022 with a final report expected September 2024. The changes in Legislation is a response to one of the recommendation of the Interim Report and even though the Interim Report was launched in August 2022 little has progressed. Thirteen recommendations are made in the Interim Report however on close examination they are little more than increase travel and funeral allowances and draft legislation.

Sadly, it can be claimed, we are in the middle of another military disaster not of battlefield blunders but the Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans Suicide that, as the dates indicate above, has been sitting for almost three years. Not in any way addressing the very disturbing figures that in just over twenty years, the Commonwealths own data confirms 1677 veterans have died by suicide. That is three times the amount of Australian soldiers killed in Vietnam. In my view, none of the recommendations address the urgency of the deeply disturbing statistics felt by the Veteran community and all Australians.

- **Recommendation 1- Interim Report- Legislation Reform**

I agree Australia's veteran compensation and rehabilitation legislative system is so complicated that it adversely affects the mental health of some veterans –both severing and former serving ADF members.

However, I am yet to be convinced the proposed new legislation, the **draft Veterans Entitlements, Treatments and Support (Simplification**

and Harmonisation) Bill must not create four categories of veteran's entitlements instead there must be only one category. The new reforms should be ridding the confusing mess with entitlements and compensation, that has been often determined by different rates and on different eligibility criteria.

That the Government is not proposing to harmonise all entitlements across the three Acts the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004 (MRCA) the Veterans Entitlement Act Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence Related Claims) Act 1988(DRCA) and the Veterans Entitlement Act 1986 (VEA) is very concerning. Proposing to cherry-pick and improve only some of the entitlements is extremely disappointing.

Currently there are veterans covered by the old MRCA, veterans covered by the old DRCA, veterans covered by the old VEA. Then there will be veterans covered by the new MRCA. Benefit amount should be the same for all.

Recommendation 2-5 Department of Veterans' Affairs claims process

The Claims system is far too complex and often difficult to navigate. The backlog, especially the time taken to finalise a claim and inconsistent processing must be treated with urgency, no matter how large or how small the claim. Over recent years, there have been many reports including the 2019 Productivity Commission's report "A Better Way to Support Veterans" highlighting the issues above. Despite calling for urgent change these issues still remain. How many additional suicides will it take to have these issues addressed with urgency. The proposed new legislation, if passed by the Parliament will not come into effect until 2026.

Often Veterans are being forced onto months-long waiting lists to get mental health support because of a rebate system that is significantly lower than NDIS clients. **Medicare, Aged Care, NDIS and Veterans rebate payment should all be same.**

Many veterans are struggling to get psychological help due to the funding disparity. A number of National groups including the Returned & Services League of Australia, the Australian Medical Association, the Australian Psychology Society and the Australia Physiotherapy Association are all very supportive of changes being made to ensure there is no funding disparity.

It appears no mention of this very important issue in the Interim Report or a recommendation for changes to be instigated Why?

Recommendation 6- Protections to engage

Many veterans find it almost impossible to talk about their experiences especially in a formal environment. While there should be legislative reforms to provide enhanced protections for ADF members much will not change unless a less formal environment is provided- one on one and not in a formal setting.

Recommendation 7-8 Parliamentary privilege and public interest immunity

The Royal commission must be able to receive evidence about prior inquiries conducted by Parliament and examine Government decision – making that might otherwise be confidential

Recommendation 9-13 Access to Information

Information must be available about veterans themselves and families must be able to access information about their deceased loved one. There is certainly too much complexity and also a lack of clarity about accessing information from ADF and DVA

Conclusion:

- 1. The time taken since the Royal Commission was established is far too long. The proposed legislation recommended by the Interim Report, if passed by the Parliament, to not come into effect until 2026 is particularly galling. Where is the urgency for changes to be made to reduce Veteran suicide? Does the proposed legislation address the important issues?**
- 2. The proposed legislation only cherry-picks some changes in allowances and does not address the core issue of mental health treatment.**
- 3. The Interim Report does not address lack of access to urgent treatment for Veteran's mental health for some and ensure that access to treatment is available.**
- 4. The Interim Report does not address the disparity with other Government rebates.**
- 5. The urgent changes needed to the claims process especially the finalisation of complex claims and inconsistent processing.**
- 6. The formal process for contributing to issues with the proposed legislation**

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