



Media Transcript

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Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of ANZAC
Special Minister of State

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MINVA053

DOORSTOP – DOWNER EDI WORKS BRISBANE

Topics: Trial Veterans Employment Assistance Initiative.

MINISTER RONALDSON: It's terrific to be here at Downer EDI in Brisbane with Dennis and Terry here on my right to announce a new initiative - a new employment initiative for veterans in this nation. We are running a three month trial in Brisbane and predominately it will start with 50 men and women who are wounded, injured and ill, who are going through a rehabilitation program. While we've had this program in the past we've now added new dimension to it.

We want to link ex-service men and women with employers, so this initiative is the start of that process. We want to have a three month trial. We didn't want to rush into it. We've got to make sure that it works for both the ex-service personnel and also for future employers.

So we will look at this [trial] and see how it works and see what works, what doesn't work. It'll be refined and then it's my very passionate hope that we can roll this out across the nation over the next two or three years.

The important thing about what we're doing is that while the Department has had a great rehabilitation program, the emphasis on outcomes and long term employment needs to be strengthened and that is what we have done.

We're just about to enter the Centenary of ANZAC period. But it is not just about events of 100 years ago, it is [also about] the nation's obligation to both men and women who have served over the last 100 years. To put this in to context, the youngest client of my department is 14 months old. So these are long term initiatives and long term requirements.

The involvement Downer EDI and Terry was really something off to one side. It was not part of this trial but Downer has taken the initiative and Terry has been

talking very favourably about how much it has made a difference for him.

There is no doubt that having a job changes one's outlook, there is no doubt that from a family point of view you can never underestimate the importance of full time or part time employment, so I am really proud of this announcement today.

Proud of it because it is the last bit in the jigsaw puzzle of our repatriation scheme. I know that across Australia there will be employers who, once they see this, once they see the outcome of the trial are going to accept that they also have national responsibility to look after those who served their nation.

It is not widely known that some 72 000 Australian men and women have served this nation overseas since 1999. And we do have an obligation to ensure that they can resume as normal a life as possible when they transition from the Australian Defence Force.

So I am really pleased to be here, really really pleased to be here with Terry and I thank you most sincerely for being part of this, and Dennis too, and Downer EDI again. Thank you very much – you are a great example of corporate Australia and I know that right throughout the nation there will be employers who will be anxious to do their bit as well. So Terry I might throw to you first.

TERRY:

Thank you Minister, I feel honoured to be a part of this employment assistance initiative. Completing a program and getting a permanent job at Downer has changed my life.

Before I joined Downer I was a heavy vehicle diesel mechanic in the Army for 17 years. I got injured and couldn't do my primary job in the Army however I continued on teaching and training and part of the process within the Army.

Being forced to leave a job that I loved and one that I thought I would spend the rest of my working days in was a life changing moment. I felt very down and had a feeling that I failed myself as I hadn't fulfilled my goals within the Army.

At that point I was given the opportunity by DVA to do different training courses, to increase my motivation and skills. Gretchen and her team at Careership were very helpful with this part of my training, they got in touch with

Downer and found me a position there which I then commenced a three month work trial on.

At the start of my three month work trial, I wasn't expecting a position with Downer from it. However their work trial led to a position and I am very grateful to Downer for taking me on board.

I have really enjoyed my job at Downer at the moment, I find it stressful at times but it is really rewarding, and I really think other injured soldiers should get out there and give it a go with this new program and try to get the most out of it.

I would like to thank the Minister here for taking the initiative to kick-start this program and help these veterans out. Thanks very much.

[Applause]

DENNIS: Thank you Minister, Downer is proud to be associated with a program that firstly put Terry in with us at Strathpine and if this continues one I would like to think that Downer can have an association with Careership and DVA to pick people up.

Terry came into a fairly stressful position, we are a fairly widespread and difficult industry and it has quite a few challenges. Terry has met all those, he has now been with us for the best part of 18 months, he's settled in.

I think he really enjoys the work that we do and Downer has certainly has the benefit from Terry coming in and hopefully DVA can continue to do their work. So thank you Minister.

MINISTER: Questions?

JOURNALIST: How does it work? What's the incentive for businesses?

MINISTER: Well I hope the first incentive for business will be the fact that they can see that the Government and DVA and companies like Downer are serious about giving opportunities to ex-defence service personnel.

In relation to this trial programme we will have approximately 50 people on the trial. It is purely voluntary for those who have indicated a desire to return to work. And we will work with the rehabilitation providers, we will work with employment providers and we will match skills to individual employers.

And we really do want to see what works for the ex-service personnel and works for different employers, so that we can frame a longer term or medium to longer term program that is going to work for everyone.

There is no point having program in place that firstly doesn't meet the needs of ex-service personnel and secondly doesn't meet the needs of employers.

That is why we have got the trial, and we will see what the issues are, if there are any, and we will see what is working best and then we hopefully will be able to roll this out in a national sense.

JOURNALIST: How much money is changing hands? Is the government paying part of the salary or how does it work in that way?

MINISTER: Well that will depend on the people involved and the companies they are going to, and on the level of support.

This is actually not about money, this is about the responsibility of government, the responsibility of corporate Australia and the need and desires of ex-service personnel to make this trial work. There will be some financial assistance available to employers but again that is not what this is about.

We want to see what is going to work and we will then worry about those issues later on. I am determined to ensure that we get the process right first, to match the skills and to make sure employers and the potential employees are happy with the outcome, and then we will speak to further that.

JOURNALIST: Does that include health care benefits for the veterans? If they are employed will they receive the same health care benefits?

MINISTER: There will be no changes to those sorts of entitlements. This is not about replacing one with the other. This is about matching a potential employee with potential employers, and of course if people get full time work then the dynamics will change.

But I have been pleaded with by many younger veterans to do something like this. They just want to get back into work, they want some normality in their lives, they know what the families dynamics are.

As Terry and I were talking about before, the dynamics of a full time job, the dynamics of normality, the dynamics of the feeling of self-worth again that Terry talked about.

That is what this is all about and that is why I am very confident that we can get [this program] out of the trial period and be able to roll this out for everyone.

JOURNALIST: So is it like setting them up with temporary internship or is it going into full time job?

MINISTER: Look there will be a bit of horses for courses. There will be some people who will go into work longer than others at the time they first start.

So this really is about matching individual with an employer and then with rehabilitation and the employment support that is being provided. We will work out what is best for the ex-service personnel. That can depend on the level of their injury, their illness or the level of their wounds.

It won't be one size fits all and that has been my concern all the way through. It would have been easy to just go out and start a program without doing the work.

I am determined to make sure that this works for everyone and if it does then I think it will be taken up both by ex-service personnel but also by employers.

JOURNALIST: What's the benefit though to employers? Is it relying on them to just out of the goodness of their hearts to help ex-servicemen?

MINISTER: No, the integral part of all this is that there are people like Terry who come out of the Defence Force with remarkable skills and I think the issue has been, quite frankly, that the employers do not necessarily understand what those skills are.

EDI Downer looked at Terry's background and made a decision that they thought it was worth having a crack at it, both for Terry and for themselves.

This is really about matching those skills, and the Defence Force personnel have a very very broad range of skills, this is about matching those skills to potential employers.

So no this not a goodness of your heart program. But having said that I believe that the Australian corporate sector understands that their responsibilities are there to

look after those that have served their nation and not just my Department, not just government but community and the corporate sector.

I'm very very confident that they will see this program, see what we're trying to do and will want to participate.

JOURNALIST: What's the budget for it, for the trial?

MINISTER: Well it is all internal at the moment and we will be providing the rehabilitation service and providing the employment services.

It is all internally funded, but as I said before this is a trial period, we want to see what works and what issues there might be.

Once we have done that we will then review the program. We will obviously be speaking with ex-service personnel to see what their feedback is, we will be speaking to the employers and then if we roll it out nationally there will be obviously some financial requirements.

But I am not, quite frankly, concerned about that at the moment, I just want to see how this trial goes, make the trial work best and then make the roll out work even better.

JOURNALIST: Are you expecting that mental illness will play a great role in the people that sign up for this program. Has that been considered?

MINISTER: Absolutely, both those with physical and mental injuries but one should not assume that just because someone has injuries whether mental or physical that they are not capable of working.

I am sure Terry would agree with me that they are. They just need the opportunities, they might need the right mix, they need employers who understand that they do have a mental illness or a physical injury. And that is why this trial will be matching those employers with those employees. So there is a level of understanding from both groups. And I think that if we can nail that part of it, we can very successfully roll out a larger programme. I do not think anyone should assume that ex-defence personnel do not want to get a job irrespective of what their illnesses are. They do, and this trial will be the start of that process.

JOURNALIST: How timely is this considering that Australia is considering participating in another war?

MINISTER: Well, I first discussed this matter with my Department Secretary the day after I was sworn in.

I said this was a very big issue for me personally because I had had such representation from younger veterans who just wanted an opportunity. So this is unrelated to what may or may not be happening at the moment but it is something that I believe will set this nation up for the future.

It is us accepting that we do have responsibilities to those who have served us and I think that employers and the ex-service community are waiting for this sort of opportunity.

JOURNALIST: Terry can we just ask you today to explain to us more about the [inaudible]

TERRY: Yeah well when you leave forcibly from the Army, you kind of feel like it's the end of your life really.

You are not ready for it, you hit rock bottom in this world, in a bit of a rut there. So the program helped me, it just got me motivated and looking for work rather than just sitting at home expecting some sort of payout.

It pushed me out to look for work really. So if it hadn't been for that, I think I would still be at home taking each day as it came.

JOURNALIST: Is it a common problem [inaudible] getting forcibly of the Army?

TERRY: It is, a lot of mates I know and people who got out they do receive their entitlements when they get out but they, same as me, they get in a bit of a rut there think they can't find anything because they're not doing the same job as they were doing when they were in the Army.

For instance, I could no longer be a mechanic so I can't do much else because of my injuries, I'd rather do maintenance type roles. There are a lot of people in my circumstances that are the same.

JOURNALIST: And can I just ask you, Dennis, what sorts of benefits have you seen in hiring an ex-servicemen?

DENNIS: The greatest benefit is that Terry actually wanted to get back into the workforce. So he had a commitment to

come to us and to do the job that we could use his talents for.

The ex-service men are well educated men, who have hit a bit of a rough patch, but Terry wanted to go to work, came into the workforce and it just worked so well for everyone at every level.

JOURNALIST: And you would encourage other employers to get on board with this program?

DENNIS: Oh sure, yes.

JOURNALIST: Anything else you wanted to add at all?

DENNIS: I think that the fact that we have got a lot of ex-service men in Downer already, they simply seem to adapt well to the roles. The fact that we have got young men coming back from theatres of operation looking for work, wanting to get re-employed, they need to support their families, their kids, their wives. If companies like ours can offer those opportunities and it works, I think it is a wonderful thing.

MINISTER: I think it is also important to remember that there have been a lot of women as well who have served in the last 20 years, and this program is for both men and women ex-service personnel.

So it is not just people like Terry at Downer, but there will also be a lot for women who will also be looking for those opportunities and we should never forget them and we should never forget that I think there are a lot of families who are going to be relying on these sorts of initiatives.

As Terry said, when you get down it also brings your family down with you as well, so this is not just about the ex-service personnel but it is about their families as well. So I think if you've got nothing else, thanks very much for coming along today.

JOURNALIST: Thank you