



## **Australian Government**

Statement by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs  
the Hon Darren Chester MP

### **Veterans and Their Families**

24 October 2018

## **Introduction**

I ask leave of the House to give the second annual Ministerial Statement on Veterans and Their Families.

Almost two million Australian servicemen and women have served our nation since Federation.

And to those men and women, to those who have gone before you and to all of their families, I would like to say, quite simply – **thank you for your service.**

We should be extremely grateful for the courage, service and sacrifice of the brave men and women who make the decision to put on a uniform in defence of our great nation.

It is an honour to serve as the Minister representing those men and women who are Australia's veterans and their families, and it is a significant responsibility which I share with my Department.

One hundred years ago this year, the Repatriation Commission was created with the sole purpose of providing care and support to Australia's veterans and their families.

A century on, the Government and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) remain steadfast in their commitment to that mission – to put veterans and their families first.

Across Australia, DVA currently supports more than 280,000 veterans and their families and the support our Government provides to the veteran community is significant.

Each year, more than \$11 billion is committed to fund the services and supports that veterans and their families rely on. Our Government is absolutely committed to putting veterans and their families first.

I would like to update the House in more detail on what the Australian Government is doing to support veterans and their families.

## **Veterans and their families first**

When I started in this portfolio, I vowed to listen to veterans and their families. I speak with veterans and their families every day in my role as Minister.

Many have positive things to say about their experiences with DVA and the support they receive. Others raise issues that concern me. I acknowledge that things do not always run smoothly.

The feedback we receive is invaluable – the good and the bad.

Our Government has listened, which is why we are reforming our policies and processes and replacing our systems.

Our Government is bringing our 100 years old organisation into the digital age. Paper files are being replaced with digital files, and a new compensation system will see 18 out of date computer systems shut down.

Claims can now be made more easily through the new online 'MyService' internet portal. MyService has been built from the ground up by listening to veterans and their families, addressing their desire for faster decisions and faster claims processing.

We recognise that veterans need to get the right help as quickly as possible to enable them to pursue wellness over illness. Some claims can now be approved in seconds.

We are also improving our telephone services and are well on the way to having a single contact number for veterans and their families – 1800VETERAN.

Faster access and faster answers provide greater certainty to veterans and their families, and can mean they get the treatment and support they need much sooner.

## **Reviews**

In addition to getting direct feedback from our veteran community, a number of significant reviews, inquiries and studies into the performance of the Department have occurred, or are underway.

These reviews have highlighted issues in the operation of the DVA and the quality of its service delivery.

We have seen the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee investigate veteran suicide, and a review conducted into the management of Mr Jesse Bird's case.

In March this year, the then Treasurer and I announced a Productivity Commission inquiry into the system of compensation and rehabilitation for veterans and their families.

This inquiry is considering the support system for veterans' rehabilitation and compensation, as well as the effectiveness of DVA's governance arrangements, administrative processes and service delivery. The Commission is due to report to the Government by mid-2019.

In April, I also announced a \$1.7 million study on advocacy and support services for veterans and their families led by Mr Robert Cornall AO. This study will conclude later this year.

In June, the Australian National Audit Office tabled its performance audit of DVA. The Secretary of DVA and I agreed to all six of its recommendations.

These reviews, inquiries and studies are providing invaluable insights into how we can continue to improve and expand the services we provide.

They also emphasise that we need to continue to work hard to better support veterans and their families. Our Government is driving this change.

In the first Ministerial Statement on Veterans and Their Families last year, my predecessor focussed on the issue of veterans' mental health. I would like to provide an update of the initiatives we have now put in place.

### **Mental health support**

Supporting the mental health needs of our veterans has been a key focus for our Government with around \$200 million being spent annually on mental health services and support.

We have introduced an important reform, known as 'Non-Liability Mental Health Care', which provides free and immediate mental health treatment for any mental health condition.

This is available to anyone who has served a single day in the full-time ADF, as well as reservists with disaster relief or border protection service or those injured in a service related training accident.

Families of those eligible for non-liability health care can also access the range of counselling and support services offered through *Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling*, available 24/7, 365 days per year.

The Government has invested heavily in this area, as we know that quick access to mental health treatment and early intervention is key to better mental health outcomes.

An additional \$31 million was also allocated to further improve the access and delivery of mental health services and support to address the recommendations of the review into the management of Mr Jesse Bird's case.

### **Veteran Payment**

Our mental health initiatives include the Veteran Payment.

A new Veteran Payment took effect on the 1st of May this year with a \$16.1 million commitment from the Government.

The payment supports financially vulnerable veterans and their families while they wait for decisions on their claims for mental health conditions. It also extends early access to rehabilitation services to these veterans.

### Family Support

A new Family Support initiative commenced in May with a \$7.1 million commitment from Government.

It provides additional child care and counselling support for the families and children of veterans who have undertaken warlike service.

This initiative is about supporting families of veterans and the vital role they play in a veteran's rehabilitation.

### GP Health Assessment

From next July, all separating ADF members will have access to an annual comprehensive health assessment by a general practitioner.

This is a \$2.1 million commitment from the Government.

The Annual GP Health Assessment will assist in the early detection and treatment of mental and physical health concerns during a member's transition to civilian life, addressing a high risk period for the emergence of mental health conditions and suicide.

### Case Management

A new Case Management program is being implemented that better coordinates case management services for up to 200 veterans over a two-year period with a \$4 million commitment from the Government.

The service began in August and provides an intensive and supportive case management service for transitioning and ex-serving ADF members requiring additional support.

### Veteran Suicide Prevention

We have also implemented a new approach to the prevention of suicide in the veteran and ex-ADF community. The Department has partnered with *beyondblue* to deliver its 'The Way Back Support Service' as part of this new program.

*Beyondblue* has adapted the service specifically for veterans and ex-serving ADF members, and it will link to our *Open Arms - Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling*. The service will provide assertive outreach to ex-serving ADF members and veterans as part of their discharge from hospital.

### Assistance Dogs

Earlier this year, I was pleased to announce in partnership with La Trobe University, a trial initiative that will pair assistance dogs with veterans with PTSD.

This initiative will train, allocate and monitor assistance dogs and complement other well established treatments for veterans with PTSD.

The assistance dogs will be trained to perform specific tasks that contribute to the management of the veterans' PTSD.

#### Coordinated Veterans' Care for Mental Health

Our Government is also providing funding for a Coordinated Veterans' Care program for Mental Health.

This program uses a team-based model of care led by a GP and supported by a practice nurse.

It will support up to 250 veterans living in rural and regional areas who have mild to moderate anxiety or depression, and a chronic physical condition accompanied by pain.

#### Streamlined Access to Incapacity Payments

Our Government is streamlining access to incapacity payments. This initiative provides improved support to veterans experiencing a mental health condition to re-enter the workforce.

It assists veterans to manage their return to work, including liaising with employers to resolve any difficulties, coordinating care with health professionals, and developing management strategies to promote resilience.

Noting that an individual's capacity to work with mental health conditions will vary, it is estimated that this initiative will assist 200 to 300 veterans every year.

#### Launch of *Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling*

Last week, while in Sydney for the opening of the Invictus Games, I launched the *Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling*.

*Open Arms* provides essential 24/7 counselling services to veterans and their families. It will continue its remarkable legacy started by our Vietnam veterans for new generations of veterans and their families.

### **Transition**

Since taking on the role of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, it has become clear to me that the management of the transition process that each ADF member must undergo to return to civilian life continues to present significant challenges for the Defence Personnel and Veterans' Affairs portfolios.

I'm keenly focussed on improving the support available to serving members as they transition to civilian life, including helping them secure meaningful employment and access to mental health services.

Each year, around 6,000 service men and women leave the ADF and return to civilian life. Most members make the transition successfully and quickly re-establish civilian lives. For some, this move is not as easy or positive as it could be.

There may complex social, financial, employment and wellbeing challenges to face, particularly for those who enlisted at a young age.

A number of new transition initiatives have been implemented to help.

### Early Engagement Model

The Departments of Veterans' Affairs and Defence are working much closer than they have in the past to provide a seamless transition.

The Early Engagement Model is one example. Since its recent implementation, it has ensured that all current and former ADF members are known to DVA before they leave the ADF, facilitating faster access to services and faster access to support.

### Veterans' Employment Program

Our Government recognises the skills and experience of our veterans. Our Government established the Prime Minister's Veterans' Employment Program which aims to showcase the unique skills and experience of our veterans.

This is not about charity or handouts. This is about educating corporate Australia about the nature of military service.

My message to employers is simple – **employing a veteran is good for your business.**

Military training instils discipline, a strong work ethic, leadership skills, teamwork and loyalty. All wonderful assets in the modern workplace.

In March, I was delighted to attend the inaugural Prime Minister's Veterans' Employment Awards.

The Awards recognise organisations that employ or support veterans and spouses of serving ADF members, as well as the significant contributions being made by veterans in the workplaces around Australia.

A further initiative has seen \$4.3 million allocated to provide additional support to veterans who are finding the transition to the civilian workforce challenging. This will include

assistance with resume and interview preparation, translation of ADF skills into civilian competencies, mentoring and coaching services.

### Incapacity step-down

In this year's Budget, the Government also allocated \$10.8 million to minimise the financial strain on veterans who are receiving incapacity payments and studying.

This initiative will ensure that veterans' incapacity payments will continue at 100% of their normal weekly earnings while they are undertaking full-time study.

We know the best type of support for our ex-servicemen and women is the economic independence that comes with a job. That's why we are helping veterans to undertake study to help them transition back to the civilian workforce.

### Transition and the Invictus Games

Transition is also a major theme of the 2018 Invictus Games being held this week.

Along with competitions in the sporting arena, the Games provide an ideal platform to discuss veterans' issues with national and international partners, and those involved in supporting veterans and their families.

In association with the Games, DVA and the ADF are holding a number of events to highlight best practice veteran support, focusing on the themes of transition, health and wellbeing, education and employment.

Last weekend, I met with my counterparts from our 5-Eyes partner countries. We are all facing similar challenges in the area of veteran suicide and mental health, transition and employment.

We recognise the value of close collaboration, and we recognise that we are stronger together.

I look forward to being in Sydney again on the weekend to cheer on the 72 men and women from the Australian team as they do us proud and demonstrate their courage and resilience and the healing power of sport.

### **Commemorations**

This Government is determined to ensure the service and sacrifice of Australia's servicemen and women is appropriately commemorated and remembered by both current and future generations of Australians.

Of the almost two million people who have served in defence of Australia, more than 102,000 have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Since taking on the role of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, I have been privileged to attend many ceremonies that honour our servicemen and women, and which recognise their remarkable dedication and courage.

I have also had the incredible honour and responsibility of overseeing the final year of the Government's Anzac Centenary and Century of Service program.

This has included an extensive domestic and international commemorative program honouring a Century of Service and the opening of the extraordinary Sir John Monash Centre honouring the more than 295,000 Australian volunteers who served on the Western Front.

This year on the 11th of November, Australia will join a host of other countries to commemorate the Centenary of the First World War Armistice.

I strongly encourage all Australians across the nation to pause for a minute's silence, wherever you may be on the day, in solemn respect for all those who have served on our behalf.

Commemorative services and actions such as a minute's silence are integral to our promise to never forget and remind us of the brave deeds of our serving men and women.

The Anzac Centenary has been a powerful, engaging and challenging time, leaving a reinvigorated national awareness and increased knowledge of Australia's military history and the service and sacrifice of earlier and current generations of Australian servicemen and women.

### **Australian Veterans Covenant**

To coincide with the Centenary of the Armistice, I am working with the ex-service community and my State and Territory colleagues to examine the value of an Australian Veterans Covenant, which I believe could be a considerable legacy of the Anzac Centenary.

The Covenant could promote active living, employment opportunities and stronger connection and support for veterans and their families in their local communities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this Government is committed to caring for the men and women who defend our nation.

We are striving to better meet the needs of veterans and their families now and into the future.

My priority as Minister is to ensure our veterans and their families can quickly and easily access all they need through a single point of contact with the Department, be it online, over the phone or face to face.

I recognise the work the Department is doing to improve the way it serves the veteran community, but acknowledge that the journey still has some way to go.

I will conclude where I started with a message to all ADF personnel, the veteran community and family members who support them.

**Thank you for your service.**