

Parliament must take real action to better the health and wellbeing of Australia's veterans

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Parliament must come together and work constructively to better the health and wellbeing of Australia's current and ex-serving ADF members and work towards stopping veteran deaths by suicides, says Consumers Health Forum of Australia CEO Dr Elizabeth Deveny.

Dr Deveny's comments come after the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide handed its final report to the Governor-General yesterday.

"The last three years of the Royal Commission has shown us that the systems designed to support veterans and their families need real, fast and meaningful reform.

"We have all been touched by the lived-experience testimony of veterans and their families which exposed how the lack of support has had serious negative impacts on people's mental health and wellbeing and for many led to a death by suicide," said Dr Deveny.

The Royal Commission has made several health and wellbeing recommendations in its final report, including a recommendation to expand and strengthen healthcare services to veterans.

"CHF strongly supports the strengthening of healthcare services to veterans. Importantly this recommendation calls to provide support to primary healthcare providers working with veterans. It also calls for greater support to let veterans know what services are available. It's a pretty simple proposition that in order for someone to use a service, they need to know of its existence, we are supportive of any measures which help promote relevant services to the veterans' community. If implemented

correctly, these measures will create better health equity for our veterans and could also be looked at as a future healthcare model to benefit civilian health service delivery,” said Dr Deveny.

Dr Deveny said that when Government agencies start creating more wide-ranging healthcare services for the veteran community, they must co-design any new service or program, to ensure that the needs of veterans and their families are met.

“It has been really pleasing to see the need for co-design across the Royal Commission’s recommendations. We know that when the people who use the service have a say and can influence its design and function, it often results in better take up of these services when implemented,” said Dr Deveny.

The Final Report also recommends that health practitioners who work with veterans are supported, through education modules to build and improve their military cultural competency.

In recognition of the critical role Defence families play, the Final Report has recommended that the communication, services and support families receive is improved.

“We heard during the Royal Commission just how important families are in supporting current and ex-serving ADF members. When we are sick or recovering from an injury, we all know how important family love and support is in our recovery. CHF is pleased to see family members, who often take on caring roles, recognised in the Final Report,” said Dr Deveny.

CHF also supports recommendations to strengthen the Department of Veterans’ Affairs performance targets for claims processing timeframes which would see at least 80% of claims being determined within 90 days by 1 July 2028. Having compensation claims managed in a respectful, timely and trauma-informed way will go a great way in helping veterans access the health and wellbeing services they need, while reducing their fear and anxiety about their claims, which the Royal Commission demonstrated could be a contributing factor of veteran deaths by suicide.

“The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has shown all Australians where the current system is letting our veterans and their families down. It also showed us what needs to be done to prevent veteran

deaths by suicide. No longer can any politician or government say they didn't know. I strongly encourage the parliament to work collectively in the best interests of current and ex-serving members of the ADF and accept the Commission's Final Report recommendations," said Dr Deveny.

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CHF endorsed health and wellbeing recommendations

Establish a brain injury program (Recommendation 61)

Establish a research translation centre for defence and veteran health care (Recommendation 62)

Reduce stigma and remove structural and cultural barriers to help seeking (Recommendation 63)

Establish an enterprise-wide program to monitor and prevent physical and psychological injury (Recommendation 64)

Improve access to, timeliness and quality of mental health screening and use the data effectively (Recommendation 65)

Where possible, support injured members to be rehabilitated at work, within their home unit (Recommendation 66)

Improve suicide-prevention training so it is practical, tailored, informed by lived experience and delivered in person (Recommendation 69)

Revise protocols for responding to suicidal crisis to be in line with clinical best practice (Recommendation 70)

Increase the Department of Veterans' Affairs fee schedule so it is aligned with that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Recommendation 71)

Expand and strengthen healthcare services for veterans (Recommendation 72)

Improve military cultural competency in health professions working with veterans (Recommendation 73)

The Department of Veterans' Affairs to fund a program to support members' wellbeing during transition to civilian life (Recommendation 81)

Establish a new agency to focus on veteran wellbeing (Recommendation 87)

Develop a national funding agreement on veterans' wellbeing (Recommendation 88)

Consider giving the Veteran Payment to more veterans with physical health conditions (Recommendation 97)

Strengthen Department of Veterans' Affairs performance targets for claims processing timeframes and improve transparency (Recommendation 98)

Improve the support, communication and services provided to Defence families (Recommendation 103)