

ADVOCACY, ENTITLEMENTS AND SUPPORT (AES) SPOT¹

Introduction

I introduced the Spring edition with the comment that the pace of change in veterans' affairs is accelerating. I'd like to continue that theme in this article by looking at two areas: younger veterans and the Government's response to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Reference Committee's Report on Suicide of Veterans. The views I express in this article are my own and do not necessarily have the approval of the National Council.

Younger Veterans

I am sure most readers will have heard a Vietnam-era peer from any of the traditional ESOs bemoaning their inability to attract younger veterans. Although based on different contact, I find it hard to reconcile that widely-held view with my own experience, historically, as a TIP Chair, and ongoing as an advocate and member of the Advocacy Training and Development Program.

Without doubt, an overwhelming majority of younger veterans is joining or creating their own support groups rather than joining a traditional ESO. When asked why, the typical response has centred around our generation's 'pokies and booze' attitudes. Although the response is clearly a challengeable generalisation, a measure of their rejection is that most younger veterans, even if in dire straits, will not approach an advocate if they must enter a club.

Regrettably, this results in too many cases, in claims being submitted without knowledge of legislative provisions and legislated requisites to rehabilitation and compensation. Just as damaging, too often younger veterans post queries on social media seeking information. In most cases, responses are anecdotal and wrong. This, in turn, stimulates more trenchant discontent along the lines discussed in the Spring edition.

But, there are also signs of positive change. In all States, an albeit small number of younger veterans are being elected to Committee positions in traditional ESOs. Reportedly, they have few misconceptions about the challenge they face. The transcripts of evidence that can be found on <https://www.finance.nsw.gov.au/inquiry-under-charitable-fundraising-act-1991> give at least an insight into the dimensions of their challenge. In addition, a significant number of younger veterans have established or are managing veterans' centres or organisations that have an active relationship with a traditional ESO or a club. Many others are providing companionship and support

As might be expected, inter-generational differences must be coped with. The Greek philosophers' observations more than two millennia ago show that this is not a new phenomenon. On the other hand, I am reminded of an instance in my own efforts to connect with. Having started work on an advocacy/drop-in centre for younger veterans, I was invited to join them over a coffee on successive Wednesdays. Mutual apprehension was alleviated after a couple of interactions when a go-between communicated the following: *"What's it like? Oh, it's just like having coffee with your grandfather."*

Not necessarily assuring. But an indication of possibilities! TIP and ATDP have, however, offered opportunities for truly meaningful progress. Apart from development of the interpersonal skills to cope with inter-generational differences, compensation advocacy is grounded in legislation – or as a past PM noted: *"black letter L-A-W"*. Welfare advocacy, on the other hand, offers a far greater range of opportunities.

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As a result of veterans and their spouses' needs, when TIP began teaching welfare in the 1990s, the focus has been on aged care. The specific needs of the cohorts of veterans and their dependents emerging from the post-1990 conflicts had not yet registered. The rising tide of life-long support needs resulting from serious musculo-skeletal and mental health conditions has made a complete re-think critical.

A preliminary workshop in mid-2014 and recent ATDP workshops on younger veterans' welfare needs confirmed two fundamentals: the existing aged care focus remains essential, and a wide range of new foci must be added.

Socrates may have decried the young for "*not respecting their elders*", but that is not born out by the workshop findings. When identifying the welfare curriculum that ADTP must implement if the needs of younger veterans and their dependents are to be met, workshop participants were unanimous: "*We need aged care so younger veterans learn how to behave towards their elders*".

The background to this were deeply disturbing stories of veterans that had returned from deployments with severe mental health conditions, often opiate addicted for pain control, discharged before their claims were determined and MSBS disability pensions processed and, having exhausted their parents/family's and friends' understanding, surviving on park benches or under tarpaulins in the bush. Three organisations at the front line helping these veterans are V360 Australia, Overwatch and Veterans Off the Street Australia - none a traditional ESO.

Younger veterans' concern for their "mates" welfare and well-being has been unambiguous throughout the workshops and from even the most cursory 'surfing' of Facebook sites they access. The depth of their caring has crystallised as a clear picture of the support they want ATDP to train them to provide. Also clear is that, if ATDP does not provide that training, they will do it themselves. Already underway in at least two younger veterans' organisations are training in what they call "*first responder*" competencies. These include suicide first aid and accidental counselling. Workshop participants have made clear their concern that ATDP substantiate its relevance to younger veterans by incorporating these competencies into the welfare learning pathway.

Other competencies that workshop participants have identified include MECRB processes, basic skills of living, vicarious trauma, resilience training, fostering self-reliance, support for children in a crisis-ridden family, rehabilitation and recreation skills, and case management. Development of the curriculum continues as this article goes to press. I hope you will see the expanded welfare course rolled out in 2018. The future Welfare Advocate will have a very different skill set to the traditional Welfare Officer. He/she will "*walk beside the DVA client*" rather than "*point the way*".

Suicide of Veterans Report

The Minister for Veterans Affairs, Hon Dan Tehan, tabled the Government's response to the Senate FADT Committee Report on 24 October 2017. The Minister's Statement exemplifies the concern that spurs the Department's Veteran Centric Reform Program. It also confronts honestly the depth of the challenge that the Department faces in ensuring its administration of veterans legislation meets the demands posed by veterans of contemporary service, and especially returned veterans.

The Minister's comments on the suicide of Jesse Bird reinforce why all Advocates must be better prepared for their service delivery responsibilities and to integrate their efforts with those of the Department. To quote the Minister:

“Following Jesse’s discharge, he faced the challenge of transition back into civilian life. Due to physical injuries and the deterioration of Jesse’s mental health with the impact of PTSD during his time in the Army, Jesse found it increasingly difficult to find meaningful work that gave him the sense of purpose he had during his time serving in the ADF.

“Departmental processes failed or simply did not exist to offer services to help Jesse. While struggling with all this, Jesse decided to end his life.

‘Jesse’s case highlights the complexity and breadth of the challenge the Department of Veterans’ Affairs faces to support our veterans, particularly those with mental health conditions as a result of their service. These Australians have risked themselves in the service of our country. If these people are not receiving the support they need, then we must continue to drive change.

“Following Jesse Bird’s death, I asked the Departments of Veterans’ Affairs and Defence and the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service to thoroughly examine his case. They have conducted a review which looked at his experience with Defence and Veterans’ Affairs. This occurred in consultation with his family.

“[T]he report into the management of Jesse Bird’s case shows that while some aspects of process and management were within expectations, others were contrary to the Department of Veterans’ Affairs policy and practice. The Department of Veterans’ Affairs either did not or could not provide the support or proactive engagement Jesse needed.

“In particular, the report highlighted the issue of providing timely compensation and financial assistance to support those veterans suffering mental health conditions. The requirement for mental health conditions to be stable before being considered for compensation needs to be addressed. In addition, the provision of financial assistance when veterans are at their most vulnerable is needed. These issues let Jesse down as he was unable to get financial assistance when he needed it.”

The Minister’s Statement went on to respond to the 24 recommendations of the FADT Report. To again quote the Minister:

“The Government has accepted the recommendation that the Productivity Commission should review the legislative framework of compensation and rehabilitation and review other arrangements in the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. The Treasurer and I will develop the terms of reference for this review, which will be open to submissions from all Australians.

“The Government also accepts the Committee’s recommendation that the Australian National Audit Office conduct a review into the efficiency of veterans’ service delivery by DVA and will write to the Auditor-General to request to include this review in the 2017-18 programme of work.

“In its report, the Committee identified a number of measures that the Departments of Defence and Veterans’ Affairs should implement without the need for review. They included recommendations that:

- the Departments align the provision of mental health care;*
- the Career Transition Assistance Scheme include an option for external work experience for veterans;*
- ADF members are provided DVA White Cards on discharge; and*
- a two-track program be developed for ADF members leaving Defence.*

“Throughout the inquiry, the Committee covered a number of issues relating to the current functions of DVA. To address this, the Committee has provided a number of recommendations.

“Firstly, the Committee has recommended a continuation of the Veteran Centric Reform program in DVA, while also providing resources to alleviate claims times and resolve complex cases. This is consistent with the Government’s commitment in this year’s Budget, which provided over \$160 million to Veteran Centric Reform.

“The Committee has also recommended that the Government establish a formal Bureau of Veterans’ Advocates with the capacity to commission legal representation and training for veteran advocates.

There is an opportunity to improve the regulation of veterans’ advocacy to increase quality and consistency of services to veterans. The Government agrees with the Committee in principle that the current advocacy system needs to change.

“We will consider the Committee’s recommendation for a Bureau of Veterans’ Advocates alongside other advocacy models and will consult the veteran community about future directions in veteran advocacy.

“Most importantly, the Committee has identified measures that can help us provide support to those who need it today. The Government knows that mental health treatments work best when intervention is early.

“This is why we have put in place a system that provides free and immediate treatment for all mental health conditions for anyone with one day’s full time service in the military.

“As the Committee noted, ‘there was almost universal praise from stakeholders regarding the extension of non-liability health care for all mental health conditions.’

“This reform over the past 18 months has been revolutionary. It has meant treatment for veterans without the need to prove it was linked to service, cutting the administration and processing burden.

“However, the Committee has recommended the expansion of a number of services and systems to support this:

- 1. The development of specific suicide prevention programs targeted towards at-risk groups and a pilot of a case management service for at risk veterans;*
- 2. The expansion of online engagement with younger veterans; and*
- 3. The funding of a trial program to provide assistance animals for veterans with PTSD.”*

As I noted at the introduction to the article, the pace of change in veterans’ affairs is accelerating. Two fundamental areas are younger veterans’ welfare needs and the Government’s response to the FADT Report on Veterans Suicides. RAAFA National Council will join with the other ADSO Members in participating fully and actively in, and monitor implementation of these crucial changes in the delivery of services to veterans and their dependents.

November 2017