

Fact Sheet

February 2020

National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention

The National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention will provide an enduring national approach to suicide prevention for serving and former members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The National Commissioner will undertake two key, ongoing functions:

1. Identify and investigate systemic issues to support suicide prevention efforts, with powers to report publicly on findings, make recommendations and monitor their implementation.
2. Oversight an investigative function, with all of the powers and capabilities of a contemporary coronial office, through arrangements with State and Territory Coroners. This will include the power to compel evidence and summon witnesses.

The National Commissioner will deliver an enduring public accountability and system improvement function that promotes ongoing public health and safety. It will make recommendations to Government on actions to prevent suicide and improve the mental health and wellbeing of ADF personnel and veterans, and will monitor the implementation of those recommendations. Public reporting will be delivered through an Annual Defence and Veteran Suicide Report.

The new statutory Office of the National Commissioner will be fully operational by July 2021.

Independent Review of Past Suicides

An interim National Commissioner will be appointed to immediately commence an independent review of past Defence Force and Veteran suicides (the Review). The Commissioner will oversight a multi-disciplinary team which will undertake a one-off review and analysis of 419 suicides among serving and former ADF personnel with service between 2001 and 2017, with the capacity to include additional suicides as appropriate.

The Review will draw upon the independence and expertise of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) and consider all relevant risk factors and trends, including military service and veterans' post service experience, to improve understanding of systemic issues. It will also consider available research and data on suicide attempts, suicidal ideation and self-harm in serving and former ADF personnel. Individual coronial findings will be used to inform this analysis along with other available data.

The families of serving and former members affected by suicide will be invited to participate in the Review and share their stories and insights. Families will be able to be heard in a safe, welcoming and supportive environment, should they wish to do so, and will have access to liaison and counselling services. The critical perspective of these families will inform the Review and its findings.

The Review will deliver its Interim Report to Government within 12 months and its final Report at 18 months. The outcomes of the review will inform policy-making, as well as the opportunity to drive a proactive, safety-focussed culture.

The knowledge and expertise developed through the review will inform the ongoing work of the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention.

Veteran Family Advocate

The Veteran Family Advocate (Advocate) will place the perspectives of families at the heart of policy and decision-making, promoting better mental health outcomes for veterans. The Advocate will meet with families to hear their views on a broad range of issues affecting the wellbeing of veterans and their families, to help shape veteran policy and the administration of veteran entitlements.

The establishment of the Advocate will be undertaken through the existing Repatriation and Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commissions structure enshrined in DVA portfolio legislation, so it can be established immediately.

The Advocate's engagement with families will include a focus on mental health and suicide prevention, and contribute to our understanding of risk and protective factors relating to the wellbeing of veterans and their families, particularly during transition from the ADF.

The Advocate will focus on advocating for policy and system changes, rather than managing or mediating individual complaints. There is an existing, dedicated mechanism through the Commonwealth Ombudsman for serving and former Defence members to lodge complaints regarding administrative matters with the ADF, Department of Defence, Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and Defence Housing Australia.

The Advocate will work closely with the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention so that findings can be rapidly translated into action to eliminate suicide risk factors associated with DVA's service delivery.

Veteran suicide rates

Suicide is a complex and multifactorial issue. Improved understanding of suicide in the context of military service will support more tailored and effective Government action and investment.

According to the latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare monitoring report, there were 419 confirmed suicide deaths among serving and former Defence Force personnel with service between 2001 and 2017.

For further information on the *National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: 2019 update* visit www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/national-veteran-suicide-monitoring/contents/summary.

Support is available

The Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling service provides support and counselling to current ADF members, veterans and their families and can be contacted 24/7 on 1800 011 046.