

MATTHEW CROSSLEY

2nd July 2018

Robert Fitzgerald AM
Presiding Commissioner
Veterans' Compensation and Rehabilitation Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2604

Dear Commission Fitzgerald,

I welcome the opportunity to make a brief submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Compensation and Rehabilitation for Veterans. I make my submission as an individual who has assisted veterans in their dealings with the Department of Veteran's Affairs (DVA) and as someone who has been involved in Veterans' Organisations, as well as government administration through ministerial offices.

From the outset, I wholeheartedly acknowledge and support the implicit principle underpinning veterans' support that military service is unlike other forms of employment. My concern is that small elements of DVA do not share such views and this manifests itself in their interactions with veterans. Some of the terms that have been mentioned to me by veterans in describing their interactions with DVA are "adversarial" and "argumentative".

I strongly reinforce the comments made in another submission to this Inquiry; *There has been over the past 32 years, an ongoing continual almost universal opinion, most particularly in the veterans' community, that a wide range of organisational, cultural and systemic failings over a considerable period of time have impacted significantly on the capacity of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to provide effective service delivery to its stakeholder base to the detriment of that stakeholder base. This has led to a significant loss of trust and confidence in DVA's capacity to deliver services and support to the veteran community, by veterans and their families as experienced in a series of Senate public hearings, most particularly and relevantly, the inquiry into veterans' suicides.*

As military service is unlike other forms of employment, it can be difficult for DVA staff who have not served to have an adequate understanding of the realities of military service. This is not a reflection on individual DVA staff members but DVA must recognise it is problematic for a DVA employee with no military experience to fully comprehend the circumstances that lead to a veteran engaging with DVA. Many of the issues that veterans experience with DVA can be addressed by DVA employing more ex-service personnel.

If DVA were to employ more ex-service personnel, two issues will be addressed – DVA will develop a better understanding and empathy of veterans and veterans' issues, in addition to assisting defence personnel transition out of the ADF.

Recommendation One: DVA to develop and implement a strategy, with input from Defence and veterans' employment groups, to attract, recruit, employ and retain ADF personnel who are transitioning out of Defence. This strategy could be expanded to include ex-service personnel who have already transitioned out of Defence.

In recent times, there have been improvements to the DVA system but the current system is still too rigid, complex and challenging to navigate. Advocates play a vital role in assisting veterans to overcome these obstacles to access DVA services but in an ideal world, Advocates should not be required as the system should be easy enough to navigate and designed to support veterans.

The analogy of a square peg in a round hole sums up this situation. Most DVA processing staff lack autonomy and are bound by policies and procedures that, on occasions, make it extremely difficult for veterans to access DVA support and services. If a case is complex and is not straightforward or simple, the processing time balloons, different case managers are assigned, additional medical assessments are undertaken, and often veterans do not receive all of what they are entitled to. Often, these veterans are the most in need of assistance from DVA, yet they are the ones who have to fight the hardest for support whilst overcoming their own hurdles and difficulties.

The National Mental Health Commission (2017) said, these difficulties can cause aggravation and distress for veterans, potentially worsening a veteran's condition, and their distrust of DVA.

Recommendation Two: DVA to appoint 'Special Case Managers' in each DVA office with the authority to overrule or bypass DVA policies and procedures. These staff members should be highly experienced DVA staff who are granted the autonomy to grant support and services to veterans. Special Case Managers should not be an appeal avenue but should be engaged as trouble shooters in the initial stages of veterans' contact with DVA. This would, in turn, reduce the number of cases being appealed simply for the fact that a technicality or paperwork inadequacies lead to an application being rejected or a veteran being denied their full entitlement of support.

This submission has purposely been kept succinct and narrow, in order to avoid focus being averted away from the two recommendations.

If you require any further information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards

MATTHEW CROSSLEY