

## **Personal Reflections on recommendations contained within the Productivity Commission Draft Report – A Better Way to Support Veterans**

### **Ms Renee Wilson: Spouse of a wounded veteran**

The future of the veteran support system matters to me because I have to live with it and within it for the rest of my life, even though I am not a veteran. I write this from the perspective of someone who has lived and breathed veteran services for the last 9 years and want to see positive change to the system.

Respectfully, it does not matter what form the Government's policy application and service delivery functions for veterans and their families take into the future i.e. whether it is a department of state or a statutory body or both as suggested by this report. What matters is strategically and holistically redesigning the current system so that it actually meets the needs of those it is there to support. Any new approach which is built around needs (not wants) is agile, responsive and most of all empathetic is what is required.

The younger widow sitting at home in the mist of grief who cannot do much other than survive right now doesn't care if DVA is a department of state or a statutory body. The veteran in hospital following another attempt at self-harm because he feels like a failure does care, the carer of a veteran who works full time and support her spouse find his feet in a new civilian world doesn't care what form the system takes. What they care about is getting well again, adjusting to their new life, making ends meet and providing stability for their children.

This generation of veterans and their families are different. They are no more entitled than past veterans and families they are just different, different because life in the 2000's is different. The wars they have fought are different, the operations they have been on are different, the capability of the ADF is different, families are constructed differently and the ripple effects of military service (positive and negative) are different.

The repatriation system is tired and out dated. Like DVA, it has tried, but is ill equipped to manage the current nature of service and diverse needs of younger veterans and their families. The opportunity right now is to take a fresh approach to veteran's services and create a new system that is future proof and fit for purpose. Fundamental to a new approach is the decoupling of treatment and compensation with a focus on treatment outcomes. While some injuries and illnesses can be permanent, many are not. The benefits of a more agile system that isn't linear in nature are well known and discussed at length by countless medical professionals and indeed by the Department itself.

What is less discussed and explored in detail is the compensation element. While it has been recognised that the current system fosters illness and not wellness, I ask an even more fundamental question – what are we compensating, why are we compensating and what should be compensated? Why is it that individuals perceive a right to compensation following injury or illness as a result of their service? I don't ask these questions disrespectfully, but rather consider before decisions are taken to remove fundamental elements of compensation the answers and implications to these questions need to be fully

explored. What is working are the things that provide people with the real-time support – the things that recommendations 13.5 and 13.8 propose to remove.

There is often a lot of talk about case management of veterans and families and the inefficiencies that would bring. However, I am not sure this option has ever really been considered in terms of the cost/ benefits – financial and non-financial. A model based on episodic periods of care surely cannot be as inefficient and costly as the current system which is plagued by self-imposed inefficiency and red tape for no other reason than because that is the way it always has been. Innovation within the system is difficult beyond the “front door” of the veteran service gateway i.e. MyService. Veterans’ services have been objectively reviewed consistently since 2011, yet little attention has been paid to the operational inefficiencies which is at the heart of the complexity within the system, at the core of ‘time’ delays and frustrations felt within the veteran community.

In that regard recommendation 11.1 has the potential to yield significant efficiencies and benefits to the defence community and should not be discounted lightly. While there is no doubt significant resistance to this recommendation within the ex-service organisation sector and in deed some members of the broader defence community, many of the problems within the current system exist because of the separation between the Departments of Defence and Veterans Affairs. Over at least the last 10 years the departments have been trying to work more closely, significant amounts of money and time are spent to synchronise the ICT systems, and data collection enabling DVA to become more proactive yet we are still nowhere near where we should be. For example, my husband has had an active request with DVA to confirm whether or not he has an entitlement for lost allowances. This request has been with DVA since June 2018. To date there has been no movement because the request is still sitting with the “SAM teams” i.e. the request is sitting in limbo between the departments.

The resistance within the community relates to how defence will manage and resource a Veterans’ Policy Group. There is significant concern that Defence is such a large organisation that it won’t focus on the needs of this community and therefore expanding the remit of Defence won’t solve the problem. However, I do not hold that view. Putting Defence in charge of and making them accountable for veteran and family support policies will enhance force design, capability development and strategic decision making. Members and their families are capability – without them the best design, best technology and best equipment means nothing. Currently Defence as an organisation lacks the ability to understand the impacts of their strategic decision making on their people because they don’t get to see the affects, affects which may take many years to manifest. A leader with the capacity to properly make the link between capability realisation, force raising and veteran’s policy will be the one that will make this recommendation work. It is definitely possible and should be fully explored. Other sectors such as elite sport have made this linkage, though much smaller and very different in nature their athletes face similar challenges in life after sport. A holistic approach to people capability means just that – end to end for as long as individuals want/ need it.

With respect to transition from the ADF, the concepts proposed within recommendations 7.1-7.3 have potential, however they must be designed with the people who have

experienced and will experience this life changing transition. Efficiency at the end of the day is about making sure there is no waste. It is about ensuring that the services and support provided fulfil objectives and achieve outcomes. I would question the value in making members complete paperwork about civilian career opportunities every two years – is it valuable to the departments? Yes – it is evidence that they have told members to think about leaving the ADF – is it value able to the member and their family? Probably not. Does it provide them will the skills to get a civilian job and sustain their employment? No. There are significant lessons which can be learned by the work of the Governments’ Transition Taskforce in 2017 and additionally by a number of the submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Transition from the ADF. In particular the need to focus less on the tangible elements of transition and more so on the impacts of this significant change and challenges it can pose to a member’s identity. Further significant lessons can also be learned from international counterparts, in particular recommendation 7.3 should have regard to the initiative implemented by the Canadian Government, i.e. the Education and Training Benefit within the Veteran Wellbeing Act (Canada).

Looking at this holistically at all of the recommendations posed by the draft report I am left with one last question - why remove financial support from people that really need it in the name of efficiency yet continue introduce the very systematic inefficiencies that have crippled the current system? It seems contradictory to the problem trying to be solved.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts.