

Prime Minister,
Hon Malcolm Turnbull,
Prime Minister's Office,
PO Box 545,
EDGECLIFFE NSW 2027

Garry Ridge,

Dear Prime Minister Turnbull,

**Re Processes and Procedures
Department Of Veteran Affairs
Veterans Entitlement Act**

I write with regard to the plight of clients serviced by the Department of Veteran Affairs. The word plight is not used lightly and is meant to convey the level of difficulties faced by their specific clients – veterans.

This Department by its own home page description is existent to deliver government programs to war veterans and it is their service concept, attitude and processes which I wish to raise with you.

My recent experiences, those of other veterans as well as that of the highly experienced voluntary RSL veteran representatives have revealed a sad situation – one which obviously requires remedy.

The Department has become mired in legislation intent on administrating Acts of Parliament and minimising financial liability, thereby neglecting to focus on any level of personal contact with veterans, acting as a forms provider/claims determiner. We are advised by DVA staff that if we want any actual personal assistance then we should contact the voluntary RSL veteran representatives, this being the standard practice.

Indeed a very poor reflection on the service standards obviously endemic within the Department. Of course not every DVA client services officer has this attitude as some are extremely helpful and considerate, although restricted by Departmental practice. However others, by my direct experience as well as by reputation, demonstrate an attitude of seeking to decline claims using any means however remote and unreasonable to justify a negative decision.

2.

Claims process

Throughout the claims process there is no communication whatsoever with the client, there never being any necessity to clarify any point whatsoever, nor to inform the veteran of progress. The whole claim process is demeaning with staff demonstrating a controlling, uninformative and secretive approach.

Often, veterans will not approach a government department until they are in dire need of assistance, some due to misinformation and others believing that many are more deserving. They are then at their most vulnerable. Veterans face an ill-defined process hampered by idiotically written fact sheets administered by bureaucrats intent on minimising departmental liability. A four stage claim process ensues, the last three of which are staged escalating appeals. A daunting situation for anyone, intimidating for many who cannot cope.

Throughout this confusing and uninformed claims process, the only point which is emphatically made clear is that the veteran can withdraw at any time. Obviously many do, thereby saving the Department any further waste of resource – no thought or process in place whatsoever to personally assist, thereby encouraging continuation of the claim.

Pension levels

Should the veteran by some miracle actually qualify for some part of a disability pension they are then referred to the Departmental disability pension rates sheets. These reveal that a veteran with an approved 100% (highly unlikely- more like 50%) disability pension will receive the princely sum of \$473.10 per fortnight! Paltry recompense for obviously sustaining disabilities in the service of one's own country. No one in DVA has been able to advise who determined this pathetic level of financial support and on what justified basis.

Gold Card

The Gold Card is not automatically issued to veterans until the summarily determined age of seventy years is reached. In contrast, an application may be submitted to qualify for a service aged pension at sixty years of age provided that you receive some level of a service disability pension. This is a full five years in advance of the minimum general public qualification age of 65 years for an aged pension.

This earlier qualification is permitted by DVA as it has accepted that veterans will generally not have the same quality of life nor the life span expectancy of non-veterans.

Why then in any consideration of common sense and decency is the Gold Card not issued automatically to veterans at sixty years of age? Why would veterans not be entitled to at least this level of consideration?

3.

Fact sheets

The conversely titled "Fact Sheets" provided ostensibly to inform veterans of processes and their rights, fail miserably. Written in a manner and style which is convoluted, contradictory and unnecessarily complex beyond belief, even for a government document.

DVA staff by my own experience and by their own general admittance to myself and others, cannot explain their content, unable to elicit any clear direction. The general response to any statement of ineptitude is that they did not create them – and yes they state they also have no idea of who did. Yet another method of discouraging veteran applications, as no one knows what they are actually entitled to nor how to go about the process of applying.

These are some examples of the difficulties faced by veterans participating in a process specifically provided to assist them.

I therefore reiterate my statement that the Department of Veteran Affairs procedures and processes need urgent review particularly as it relates to:

- The staff approach to veterans to realign their attitude to one of interaction with their clients, providing assistance not administrative control.
- Complete rewrite of the Fact Sheets to provide clear, concise and intelligently worded information to veterans which is neither contradictory nor unnecessarily complicated. The objective being to inform not confuse.
- Adoption of proactive systems that seek out veterans who may need assistance thereby encouraging their participation in the process – not as is the present case of hiding behind a web site.
- Creation of a simple system of direct communication with applicants, both oral and written, whereby DVA staff can inform and assist veterans throughout the application process – completely non-existent at present. For example, have a case officer deal with all claims for a particular veteran, thereby creating a more personal environment, not the random allocation system currently in use.
- Examine the level of disability pension benefit with a view to making the amounts paid have some relevance, particularly in relation to the degree of physical impairment. For example, as logic dictates why not align the benefit to that of the Centrelink disability single support pension of \$788.00 per fortnight instead of the present DVA rate of \$473.00 per fortnight? The current rate is quite minimal and in need of urgent increase to a more realistic level in today's expensive living environment, thereby providing a more sustainable lifestyle for the veteran.
- Reducing the veteran age qualification for automatic issue of a Gold Card to sixty years instead of the present seventy years of age. Apart from the obvious considerable lifestyle benefit, it will then align with DVA's acknowledged reduced life span expectancy of a veteran.

4.

There are of course, other problematic areas which would become evident. This review can be intelligently conducted using a logical process:

- Advise RSL State bodies of the review and have their volunteer veteran representatives provide recommendations to their State Administration.
- Conduct a national meeting consisting of two experienced RSL veteran representatives from each state. Prepare a national RSL submission based on the recommendations of this meeting.
- Concurrently, DVA to seek recommendations from its staff who have direct involvement in service provision to veterans. Prepare a national DVA submission based on the recommendations of this meeting.

A National Review Committee to be formed to consider the recommendations of both meetings comprising:

- Two DVA staff experienced in veteran dealings – to provide DVA perspective, service restrictions and requirements under Legislation.
- Two RSL veteran representatives nominated from the previous national meeting – to provide practical input to proposed improvements to DVA service procedures.
- Two veterans nominated by the RSL – to provide a direct client perspective to the discussions.
- One person to chair the committee – completely independent of DVA or the RSL.

The suggested minimalized committee composition would provide a balanced input from all relevant parties, thereby negating any possible suggestion of an unfair outcome.

The agreed recommendations of the National Review Committee to be submitted in a timely manner to the offices of the Prime Minister, Minister for Department of Defence and the Minister for Department of Veteran Affairs for consideration and implementation.

Therefore Prime Minister Turnbull I implore you to commission a timely, result driven and cost effective review as suggested above, of the services and standards currently provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs to their clients – Australia's veteran community.

The expected beneficial results of this review to be implemented post haste, for veterans are presently quite disadvantaged by the uncommunicative, overly complicated and benefit restrictive processes now presented.

DVA clients - veterans who have put themselves at risk for their country, now in need of assistance from a Department charged with this very task, with many unable to physically or intellectually ask themselves - need your help.

I would be pleased to discuss the foregoing at any time, if necessary exemplifying my own experiences for clarification of any point.

Yours faithfully,
G.W. Ridge