**PRODUCTIVE COMMISSION**

***A BETTER WAY TO SUPPORT VETERANS***

**HEARING - 12 FEBRUARY 2019**

**RSL WODEN VALLEY SUB-BRANCH**

**BRIEFING NOTES**

*Go forward looking backward, celebrate the progress we have made, fight for what is right and remember where we came from.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

**Purpose**

This brief presents the views of the RSL Woden Valley Sub-Branch (the Sub-Branch) on the Productivity Commission’s draft report, *A Better Way to Support Veterans* (the Report).

**Scope**

The brief focusses on what the Sub-Branch believes to be the key issues raised in the Report and, in particular the Report’s conclusions and recommendations.

While this brief provides no details to support its contentions, the Sub-Branch representatives at the Hearing will expand any points we have raised and will respond to the Commissioners’ questions.

**RSL Woden Valley Sub-Branch: Profile**

To demonstrate the nature and extent of support the Sub-Branch provides to its client base and its history of doing so, we have attached a copy of our submission to the Cornall review of *The Future of Veterans’ Advocacy and Support Services Scoping Study*.

The submission to the Scoping Study provides a potted history of the Sub-Branch; outlines the nature and extent of the services it provides and how those services have been identified and addressed during the past six years The submission draws some fundamentally different views on what the *veteran community[[2]](#footnote-2)* needs and how best it might be obtained and/or provided to support a wide range of needs.

The Sub-Branch representatives who spoke with Mr Cornall found him interested in our opinions and recommendations. The Sub-Branch is looking forward to his draft report as the outcomes from that report should complement the Commission’s report and we believe that both should be considered together if they are to achieve the synergies the veteran community needs and deserves.

**Key Appointments**

For the past several years, the Sub-Branch has been privileged to have representatives who, while they were the ACT Branch President, served on the National Board, and represented the National Board on various national committees.

The current Sub-Branch President represented the ACT Branch as a member of the National Veterans Affairs Committee (NVAC) of the League before he was appointed to chair this committee in March 2017. This position brought several other national level commitments on behalf of the veteran community as a whole.

The Sub-Branch Vice-President responsible for Service Delivery was the immediate past ACT Branch President and is the present Chair of the NVAC.

The Sub-Branch Senior Pension Officer and Level 3 Advocate is a long-term legatee who works closely with Legacy ACT, with which we have an excellent relationship.

With a number of other connections throughout Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs), the Sub-Branch is well known and respected for its work within the ACT and region and, as such, it receives many referrals. It can also access appropriate levels within various agencies to assist in its primary task of supporting the veteran community.

**Key Points**

In the context of this brief, the Sub-Branch offers the following broad comments on the draft Report:

* The *veterans’ compensation and rehabilitation system* is satisfactory and is fit-for-purpose. However, the use of the term *rehabilitation* in the report is misleading and does not cover the need for *through-life-support* for veterans and, in some cases, members of their families, that will inevitably be required regardless of any rehabilitation the veteran has undertaken; whether such a program(s) was successful or otherwise. While a rehabilitation program will address many key issues affecting transition within the services or to civilian life, there is a continuing requirement to monitor the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of all veterans.
* Particularly during the past 5-7 years, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) has demonstrated a commitment to improve broad aspects of its performance, culture and general accessibility that together are addressing many of the issues about which clients and organisation most often complain. This is most evident in DVA’s engagement with organisations and people to develop programs included under the banner of the Veteran Centric Reforms (VCR).
* Defence has the prime responsibility of preparing military forces to defend the Nation and to deploy these forces when and where necessary in the defence of this country. The ADF should not, nor can it be required to manage those members who might be injured, become ill or otherwise become unfit for further service without compromise to its main objective. Similarly, and while any employee is responsible for its workers, the ADF is in the unique position of doing tasks under conditions that do not and will never apply to any other workplace. To achieve their goals under circumstances that have no equivalent, the ADF must take risks that would appear to those who are not involved, as being avoidable, if not unacceptable. While this approach will inevitably result in higher levels of workplace injuries than anyone would wish for, it is in Defence’s interests to manage risks accordingly and to treat its *casualties* well. This last point contributes to morale that is one of the three elements of combat power that is the basis for defence operations.
* 100 years ago, the forerunner to DVA was established to assist servicemen and women who had been injured, become ill or had been otherwise affected during their service, while the military continued with its objectives to prepare for and prosecute military activities as and when required.
* There are several specific legislative areas, especially in the Veterans’ Entitlements Act (VEA) that could be amended quite simply but which, if amended, would have a very positive affect on many aspects of the claims and appeals process. These amendments would ensure the acts that are supposed to be *beneficial legislation*, could, in fact, be applied beneficially. Similarly, there are several areas that warrant more detailed review to achieve the synergies necessary to harmonise entitlements and provide a fairer system and outcomes that would reflect their beneficial nature.
* The use of the term *wellbeing* as a verb or a task is misleading as, in our opinion, it is state that reflects one’s physical, mental and emotional health. In our experience, wellbeing can be promoted and achieved in many ways and, if plans, activities and treatments are applied well and in timely fashion, they will contribute significantly to the veteran’s wellbeing and, thus, to that of his/her family.
* While this report and other recent discussions focus largely on the veterans themselves, it is critical that each veteran’s family is included as part of a package. A spouse, children and parents can and are adversely affected by what happens to their partner, their son or daughter, or their father or mother. They are also an essential element in the veteran’s overall rehabilitation and wellbeing both immediately and through life. The *Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service* (VVCS – now *Open Arms*) has catered for spouses and children for many years. This must be expanded into any consideration of the overall requirements to support veterans.

As a final point, the Sub-Branch is concerned at the levels from which the Commission might have received its advice. Some elements of the veteran community seem to voice opinions that attract attention in the media and/or that might seem to provide a quick fix to governments and others. Others may well promote issues for political gain. While none of that should be surprising, the Sub-Branch notes that virtually all of the support that ESOs provide to the veteran community is done by elements that operate at the grassroots level, such as RSL sub-branches, Legacy clubs and the Vietnam Veterans Federation and Association elements. While many other organisations are included in the veteran community, few provide the range of services that are required to meet current needs, and yet they seem to have a disproportional voice that, in our opinion, can adversely skew the debate by not properly identifying the key issues or identifying suitable or practicable solutions.

**Conclusions**

The Sub-Branch:

* Acknowledges the draft report and the contributions that many stakeholders made to this review;
* Believes the recommendations regarding the future role and responsibilities of Defence to provide a sort of post-service rehabilitation service are unwise and unnecessary;
* Believes that, while DVA should continue its continuous improvement process under the VCR and similar programs, it is functional and does meet the requirement;
* Various legislative issues could be addressed in the immediate future to great effect, while others could be addressed in a more managed way but without undue delay, again to great effect;
* The Commission should (attempt to) engage with those members of the veteran community and others who actually do support veterans, to at least balance the views of those who are somewhat more remote from the coalface.

**J.A.F. (Jim) Gilchrist**

President

RSL Woden Sub-Branch

08 February 2019

1. With acknowledgement to HE Dame Hon Annette King, High Commissioner for New Zealand, and Patron of the RSL Woden Valley Sub-Branch; taken from a speech HE made at the NZ High Commission to celebrate Waitangi Day in 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A *veteran* is anyone who has served or is serving in the ADF. The *veteran community* includes the veteran and his/her family, including spouses/partners and children. For its purposes and when supporting veterans, the Sub-Branch defines f*amilies* broadly to meet the circumstances and, where appropriate, includes parents, (adult) children and carers or friends. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)