



19 December 2023

Re: Proposed new entity to promote the wellbeing of Defence members and veterans

To the Royal Commissioners Nick Kaldas APM, Hon. James Douglas KC and Dr. Peggy Brown AO,

Defence Families of Australia (DFA) write in response to the request for submissions for a proposed new entity to support the wellbeing of Defence members and veterans.

DFA is supportive of this proposal, with additional feedback:

The proposed inclusion of 'families' in its purpose

As the official advisors to the Minister for Defence Personnel and Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), DFA advocates for ongoing improvement in policy and practice. Our aim is to reduce the negative impacts of military service on ADF families and to support the positive aspects of this unique lifestyle.

We propose amending the purpose of this new entity to *'to contribute to improving the wellbeing of **Defence members, veterans, and their families** and preventing suicide and suicidality—from the time of their recruitment into the ADF and for the rest of their lives.'*

We know families can serve as a protective factor against suicide and suicidality among current serving personnel. When families of current serving ADF members feel supported, appreciated, and valued, they can in turn support their members' service.

We also know that family reasons are a key factor in determining whether a current serving ADF member remains or chooses to leave service. The needs of an ADF member's family must be considered part of their defence career journey and not as an afterthought.

Furthermore, in supporting their loved one's military service, Defence families themselves can experience unintended side effects such as secondary traumatic stress. This, in turn, has impacts on access to support services in the broader community.

Defence families face unique challenges, and ensuring their wellbeing is crucial for the mental, emotional, and physical health of ADF personnel, as well as for retention and recruitment efforts. Supporting Defence families contributes to the overall morale and cohesion of the ADF workforce, making it a vital aspect of maintaining and growing defence capability.

It is imperative that governments, defence leaders, and society as a whole recognise the importance of supporting military families and take appropriate measures to ensure their wellbeing.

The governance of this new entity must be set up appropriately

From our own organisational experience as a non-statutory advisory body within the Department of Defence portfolio, we have learned this structure is inappropriate for the work we do. This has impacted the effectiveness of our advocacy and our ability to deliver on our Charter.

DFA urges the Commissioners to consider a fit-for-purpose governance structure for this new entity to enable it to engage independently and productively with the Australian Defence Force, the Department of Defence, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, as well as state and territory governments, and be able to compel these stakeholders to provide timely and accurate information. This new entity should also be sufficiently resourced without taking away vital services and programs currently in place for veterans and their families.

Importance of communication, accountability and rebuilding trust

Any new entity promoting the wellbeing of Defence members, veterans, and their families must be committed to closing communication loops in order to have accountability and rebuild trust within the Defence community.

Communication with families is a key priority for the DFA team, as outlined in our bi-annual Advocacy Map (dfa.org.au/advocacy-map) which highlights our key focus areas. As veterans or family of ADF members ourselves, we have experienced communication inconsistencies during our loved ones' time in service, which have unnecessarily contributed to distress and heightened emotions. We urge you to build in key performance indicators around reporting and communication back to the Defence community into this new entity's structure.

DFA thanks the Commissioners for the opportunity to provide continued feedback. We acknowledge the challenges and opportunities ahead of our community and will continue to collaborate with yourselves and other stakeholders to address the national tragedy of suicide in the Australian Defence and Veteran community.

Yours sincerely,



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