

ADVOCACY, ENTITLEMENTS AND SUPPORT (AES) SPOT¹

Introduction

The pace of change in veterans' affairs is accelerating. Regrettably, there is a loud cadre within the veterans' community that are still baying for a Royal Commission into DVA. Let's look in this edition at some of the progress being made. You might also like to go back to the Winter edition to remind yourself of some of the other gains that I've not mentioned here. I must add that the views expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily have the approval of the National Council.

In 2014, the (then) Minister for Veterans' Affairs authorised release of the strategic development plan '*DVA Towards 2020*'. The plan was updated in 2016 and can be downloaded as a pdf via:

<https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/publications/corporate/towards2020.pdf>

The plan puts teeth into many of the weaknesses and failings that the Australian Public Service Commission identified in its 2014 '*Review of DVA*'. The report is accessible on: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/capability-review-dva>

The strategic objectives include development of a completely new information communication technology system, further training of Delegates, and a culture change program. While it is unsubstantiated, I have heard it said that if a Delegate displays an inappropriate attitude to a client, they are counselled. If their behaviour is repeated, they are replaced.

Certainly, in my observation over many months and through multiple contact, the DVA Leadership Team is fully behind VCR. In this regard, the attitude of the 'young Turks' is bewildering. As one senior officer has said publically on a number of occasions, the older generation is generally pretty satisfied with the way the Department engages with and supports them; but we just do not know how to build a bridge with the younger veterans.

This, of course, brings us to the strategic direction change that RAAFA has workshopped. A clear consensus I have heard expressed by almost every executive in every traditional ESO is that unless we attract membership by the younger generations of veterans, we will wither away to nothing. In other words, the challenge that the Department faces is one that we share.

In this respect, we – as an ESO community – owe it to our forebears to ask ourselves a series of related question:

- Why is that we are content with the benefits we are eligible for under VEA and SRCA?
- Why is it that a vocal cohort amongst younger veterans feels aggrieved at the benefits they are entitled to under SRCA and MRCA?

¹ Article was prepared by R.N. (Dick) Kelloway, National VP AES, Level 4 Compensation and Level 2 Welfare Advocate.

- Why is it that we feel that the Department deals fairly with us, and some younger generation veterans vilify Delegates and senior DVA officers at the deeply personal level on Social Media?

Since a young veteran's suicide recently, the Royal Commission into DVA has held a public rally in Melbourne and another is planned in Brisbane before this article is published. Posts on Facebook include photographs of the deceased veteran's family with ugly captions that 'DVA killed the veteran'. An advocate colleague of mine witnessed the return to DVA Offices of the senior DVA officer who went out to the family's home after the death to convey the Minister, Secretary and Department's condolences and to provide support. My colleague said that he had never seen this officer so profoundly affected. From personal discussion with Delegates, I am aware that the suicide of one of their cases deeply traumatises them.

The depths have been plumbed, and I believe it is time that our generation accepted the responsibility we were handed by our forebears. To do so, we need first to educate ourselves in the legislation, to read the criticisms by the Government's own review authority and the Departmental Secretary's forthright response to those criticisms, to understand in depth the strategic changes for which the first tranche of \$166m was appropriated in this year's Budget.

Then, we need to engage the next generation. Interestingly, Facebook posts by younger veterans are now starting to feature expressions of satisfaction about DVA support. We can follow the sites and 'Like' the favourable posts. Where egregious comments are being made we can – on the basis of knowledge gained by researching the facts – seek to redress the misrepresentations. From experience, factual posts antagonise and elicit pretty nasty attack. But, there will also be a smattering of agreement.

It is also interesting to see that other ESOs are starting to draw the line. As one fellow ADSO Member has posted on Facebook under the by-line: *What has happened to warrior ethics?* He continued: *"I am getting increasingly concerned and disappointed in the foul language, hostile vitriol, playing the man and the woman, instead of the ball with what I see and read on social media."*

There are some extraordinarily good things happening in the veterans' support space that are already materially improving the responsiveness of the 'system' to the needs of younger veterans. These include:

- the Non-Liability Health Care initiative that opens treatment for mental health conditions to any ex-ADF member with one day's full-time service irrespective of whether the condition is related to service or not
- streamlined processing by which liability is accepted 'automatically' for a range of musculoskeletal conditions where the veteran has provided service in identified employment categories of a more than a certain minimum period
- the MyService portal that, while still in beta form, allows a veteran to submit a claim online through a Wizard that seeks responses to less than ten questions and with a diagnosis attached processes liability within an average of two days (and has done so in one case in 30 minutes)

The strategic change will, inevitably, be slower than either the Minister, the Department or the veteran community want. But, let's put that into context. The benefits that veterans are entitled to are legislated. Any change of benefit requires a change of legislation. To put an example on the table. At a recent meeting of ESO executives, a senior DVA officer said, I would love to have just one Act covering all veterans; but, unfortunately, I won't see it in my life time no matter how much I want it. Then, once legislated, the benefit must be appropriated. All Government Departments are under the financial constraint that, to improvements in one benefit must be offset by savings in another.

We all have a role to play in guiding the fractious by supporting those that understand. But, we also have an unambiguous role to support those whose conditions are the result of inadequate workplace health and safety regulations. I recently read a report by a small group of ex-RAAF firefighters who, of their own volition, were able to present their case to senior DVA officers and to Chief of Air Force. I feel ashamed that RAAFA neither knew of their concerns nor supported them in progressing them. A lesson, perhaps, that has wide ramifications.

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