

Tony Piccolo MP

Member for Light



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Mr Robert Fitzgerald AM and Mr Richard Spencer
Productivity Commission
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Dear Commissioners

**Submission to the
Productivity Commission Inquiry
into the Compensation and Rehabilitation of Veterans
Draft Report: 'A Better Way to Support Veterans'**

I thank the Productivity Commission for their ongoing work in conducting this important inquiry into veterans' compensation and rehabilitation and for the extension of time to lodge feedback on the draft report.

I write this submission in my capacity as the Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs in the South Australian Parliament.

The purpose of this submission is two-fold:

- To provide the Productivity Commission with feedback on their Draft Report, made by South Australian-based Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs).
- To provide the Productivity Commission with insights into the experience of regional South Australian veterans accessing the national compensation and rehabilitation system.

In documenting the views of SA-based ESOs on the Productivity Commission's Draft Report, we have had the opportunity to read and hear the written and oral submissions made to the Productivity Commission from SA-based ESOs. Accordingly, this submission seeks to avoid repetition with those submissions.

In so doing, this submission documents new insights and important points of clarification which have been garnered from SA-based ESOs during the proceedings of a roundtable forum, hosted by my office at South Australia's Parliament House on 5 February 2019.



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Communities in Light Angle Vale Buchfelde Concordia Evanston Evanston Gardens Evanston Park (part) Gawler Gawler Belt Gawler East
Gawler River Gawler South Gawler West Hamely Bridge (part) Hewett Hillier Kalbeeba Kangaroo Flat Kingsford Magdala Munno Para Downs (part)
Munno Para West Pinkerton Plains Reid Reeves Plains (part) Roseworthy Templers Ward Belt Wasleys Willaston Woolsheds

Representatives from the following SA-based ESOs participated in the 5 February 2019 roundtable forum:

- Aboriginal Veterans SA
- Defence Consultative Group
- Defence Health SA
- Defence Families Australia
- Legacy Club of Adelaide
- Partners of Veterans Assoc. of Australia SA
- Plympton Veterans Centre
- Royal Australian Air Force Association (SA Branch)
- Returned Services League SA
- Veterans' Advisory Council
- Veterans' Health Advisory Council
- Veterans SA
- War Widows Guild of Australia SA

While the views of these and other SA-based ESOs have informed the contents of this submission, no view or opinion expressed within it should be attributed to any of these organisations. This submission was prepared by my office.

This submission provides several general points of commentary on the Productivity Commission's Draft Report, in addition to commentary on some of its recommendations.

General Points

Geographical Isolation and Paucity of Advocacy Support for Regional SA Veterans

- The Combined SA Ex-Service Organisations' Submission noted: "the geographic isolation of many veterans and the paucity of significant regional centres capable of supporting service delivery." (Point 1.2)
- At the roundtable forum (5 February 2019), many ESOs expanded upon this statement to emphasise the inadequate support for regional advocates needed to enhance regional veterans' claims for service injury and impairment.
- This observation is consistent with my own consultation with isolated regional veterans on the Eyre Peninsula, Spencer Gulf Cities, the Riverland and the South East of the State.
- In consultation, regional SA veterans - isolated from the services of Adelaide - have also voiced their concerns that travel and accommodation costs associated

with medical specialist consultations and treatments do not cover the costs of veteran carers, nor are regional veterans always accorded consideration for continuity of medical care from the Department of Veterans' Affairs in approving medical treatment costs (i.e. the closest available medical specialist may be approved, rather than a medical specialist further afield for which a veteran has an existing doctor-patient relationship).

Advocacy System Neglected in Draft Report

- Many SA-based ESOs were disappointed that the role of advocates was largely ignored in the Draft Report.
- Given the important role advocates play in strengthening veterans' compensation claims for injury and impairment, many SA-based ESOs urge the Productivity Commission to include consideration for how the advocacy system can be improved through measures which might include:
 - Greater professionalisation, training and accreditation of advocates. (This is particularly important given the ageing demographic of advocates).
 - Greater funding allocation through the Department of Veterans' Affairs for the training of advocates and reimbursement for regional travel costs etc.
 - A greater funding share for South Australian advocates, who SA-based ESOs claim are disproportionately funded.
 - Greater emphasis on removing some of the language barriers, which can impede successful claims amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans.
 - Greater acknowledgement of the role ESOs play in providing veterans with important advocacy services in the compensation and rehabilitation system.
- At present, I am informed that the training of regional advocates is sparse and is carried out on an ad hoc basis and without adequate reimbursement for the costs associated with training. For instance, in recent months the Plympton Veterans Centre has provided advocate training in regional South Australia, but its trainers are ineligible to receive reimbursement for associated travel costs, because reimbursement is limited to local travel costs only.

Veterans-Centric Approach Risks Ignoring the Important Role and Care of Partners

- SA-based ESOs welcome many aspects of the veterans-centric approach outlined in the Draft Report.
- However, there is a widespread concern amongst ESOs that the important role partners of veterans often perform in supporting the physical and emotional wellbeing of veterans is ignored in the Draft Report.
- ESOs have expressed that if the Productivity Commission ignores the important supporting roles performed by partners in its Final Report, two inequities may remain unconsidered:
 - Partners of veterans and their representative ESOs may continue to feel unacknowledged and underappreciated for the tireless roles they perform in dealing with veterans suffering with physical and/or emotional distress resulting from their service – including Post Traumatic Stress (PTS).
 - The reduction in service costs, including non-veteran specific service costs, which informal partner supports avoid, may continue to go unaccounted for. This would go against the stated approach of the Draft Report to account for the long-term costs associated with veteran support.

Points on Draft Report Recommendations

Draft Recommendations 7.1, 7.2, 7.3

- SA-based ESOs have provided generally supportive feedback on Draft Recommendation 7.1 for the establishment of a Joint Transition Command within Defence to assist with veteran transition to civilian life.
- Several ESOs emphasised the superior level of transition support provided by the Army over the other services and acknowledged that a Joint Transition Command could provide improved and consistent transition services across the ADF.
- However, there are elements of Draft Recommendation 7.2 which many ESOs have concerns about. ESOs have specifically expressed their opposition to the establishment of a career plan for ADF personnel, whilst they are in service. In this regard, particular concern has been expressed about the Draft Report's recommendation that these career plans be developed early in a serviceperson's ADF career (see: 'Overview', p. 31).

- ESOs would rather the career pathways and benefits available in the ADF be highlighted and emphasised to serving personnel, rather than those available in the civilian workforce.
- ESOs agreed that it would likely be beneficial for civilian career options to be highlighted and explained to ADF personnel when they are either nearing the end of their service, or recently discharged.
- ESOs also expressed broad support for the introduction of a veteran education allowance.

Draft Recommendations 11.1, 11.2, 11.3

- SA-based ESOs are opposed to reform of veteran administration, policy-making and support contained in Draft Recommendations 11.1, 11.2, 11.3.
- They strongly support the retention of the Department of Veterans' Affairs and believe that the department's administrative and operational shortcomings can be overcome.
- The conflict of interest described in other ESO submissions on the Draft Report - concerned with what they strongly believe to be the inappropriate merging of the existing division of administrative and policy responsibilities between Defence and Veterans' Affairs - does not need elaboration in this submission.
- An element of the ESOs' response to these draft recommendations which does require emphasis, however, is their strong opinion that if any administrative reform is undertaken, and a new body established (e.g. a Veteran Services Commission or Veteran Advisory Council - Draft Recommendations 11.1 and 11.3), the qualifications of its governing board - if prescribed - should include defence experience in addition to other desirable skill-sets.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important area of public policy.

Kind regards

Tony Piccolo MP
Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs (SA)
14 February 2019