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SPEECH
INTERVIEW
NATIONAL PRESS CLUB
TUESDAY, 2 DECEMBER 2025

THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO DEFENCE AND VETERAN SUICIDE, 12 MONTHS
ON

Check against delivery

Thank you very much, Greg, and I join in acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and their elders past and present.

Thank you to the National Press Club for hosting me today.

I want to acknowledge all those who serve and have served our nation in uniform in this room, their families and all those who are deployed on operations at the moment.

Thank you to the leaders of the organisations I have the great privilege of working with who are here today from both Defence and the Department Veterans' Affairs.

They are just a few of the faces, alongside the thousands of staff across both Departments, who are working every day to defend Australia and its national interests, and support those who have and continue to serve our nation.

The wellbeing of our serving Defence personnel, veterans and families of veterans is my key priority.

It is the honour of my life to be a Minister in the Albanese Government and the task of creating systemic change, to improve the lives of defence personnel, veterans and veteran families is not one I take lightly.

However when I was given the portfolios of Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence personnel, so many veterans told me they thought the approach of DVA was:

Delay, Deny, Die.

It is my role to consign that phrase to the dust bin of history.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, between 1997 and 2023, 1,840 serving and ex-serving ADF members have died by suicide.

That's 1,840 too many.

From Opposition, Labor heard the calls of families...

Mothers like Julie-Ann Finney; who joins us today...

that something needed to be done about veteran suicide...

that it *is* a national tragedy...

that we needed a Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

While the Morrison Government bowed to political pressure to establish a Royal Commission in 2021, Labor didn't just sit around and wait.

While the then Veterans' Minister was threatening to resign due to the Morrison Government's under funding of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, we were listening to veterans and families and committed from Opposition to fixing the system.

At the 2022 election we promised a package of support of more than half a billion dollars for the veteran community.

When the Albanese Government came to office the Department of Veterans' Affairs was not fit for purpose – some may even say it was in crisis.

After almost a decade of underfunding and under resourcing, the Department was unable to keep up with demand.

Veterans weren't getting access to the services and supports they were entitled to.

At the same time, recruitment and retention in Defence was in freefall – not only were people not signing up for the ADF, they were also leaving at record levels, putting more pressure on Defence and DVA.

It was in that context, that the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide was making it abundantly clear – we needed to make significant, cultural and systemic change in both Defence and DVA to reduce the rates of suicide in our veteran community.

It's important I take this opportunity to be clear – not all veterans are broken, and we all need to work together to dispel this myth.

We heard from the Chair of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide in this very room that;

“The vast majority of those who serve in the ADF have rewarding careers and go on to successfully transition to civilian life.”

Whilst not in any way shying away from the very important issues requiring attention, this positive experience and ongoing contribution of our Defence personnel and veterans is fundamental.

Veterans are one of the most sought after groups of individuals in the civilian workforce – with our Veteran Employment Program highlighting the skills and successes of those who continue to contribute after Military service, as well as supporting civilian recognition of their Military training, skills and experience.

I am sure we all agree that the experiences shared with the Royal Commission were deeply distressing.

It was only a matter of months after coming to Government that we were handed the first report – the Royal Commission's Interim Report and we delivered our response a month later – we had heard their urgent call for action.

One of the most heartbreaking statistics to come out of the Royal Commission was that there was a backlog of some 42,000 veteran claims that hadn't even been looked at by a staff member in DVA.

42,000 claims not even looked at...

This staggering statistic meant thousands of veterans and families of veterans were prevented from getting the help they desperately needed.

The Interim Report also revealed that the veteran compensation and rehabilitation legislative system was so complex it;

“adversely affects the mental health of some veterans ... and can be a contributing factor to suicidality”.

That has seen us fundamentally reform the veteran support system – the most significant reforms to this system in a century.

With the passage of the *Veterans Entitlements' Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Act* – the VETS Act – earlier this year, the complex tri-act veteran

entitlement system has been simplified and harmonised into a single act system to commence on 1 July next year.

This will see veterans and veteran families able to receive the supports they need and deserve, faster.

As recommended in the Interim Report, and promised at the 2022 election, we delivered 500 additional staff to process claims in the Department of Veterans' Affairs and that's meant support is reaching the veterans who need it, faster.

We cleared the claims backlog in February of last year, so now, when someone submits an initial liability claim to DVA, it is looked at within a fortnight, rather than gathering dust for months or years on end.

In the 2025 calendar year, an Initial Liability claim under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act - the most common type of claim lodged - is being processed on average within 110 days.

Under the Albanese Government, DVA is better funded than it has been in three decades.

These investments have resulted in an increase in supports for veterans.

This year's MYEFO will show an extra \$1.3 billion estimated to be spent on health and other care services for veterans.

But while there have been significant improvements, we're also not resting on our laurels.

We want to make things even more efficient and a more positive experience for veterans and their families overall.

That's why we've committed more funding to DVA's ICT and AI capabilities, to further improve the time it takes to process a veteran's claim, some \$700 million invested since we came to Government.

Today is 12 months to the day from when I joined the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister to deliver the Government's response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission.

Over those 12 months, we have achieved much, and there is even more underway.

We're focused on implementing the recommendations of the Final Report as swiftly as possible.

In December last year, the Government announced we had agreed or agreed-in-principle to 104 of the recommendations and an enormous amount of progress has already been made to implement these.

By the end of December, we will have implemented the Government's response to 32 recommendations, with a further 89 recommendations in progress or under consideration now.

For those doing quick maths in the room – yes – we are progressing work on recommendations that we initially noted for further work.

By the end of next year, we are expecting some two thirds of all recommendations to be implemented or progressing.

Next week I'll meet with State and Territory Veterans' Ministers to continue to progress those recommendations we need to work on together.

The Royal Commission itself said that its most important recommendation was the creation of a legislated, independent oversight body to oversee sustained reform to improve suicide prevention and wellbeing outcomes for serving and ex-serving ADF members.

We saw the urgency and legislated the new Defence and Veterans' Service Commission in February of this year. It commenced operations in September.

It will provide its first report on the implementation of the Government's Response to the Royal Commission by 2 December 2027.

Another key area of focus of the Royal Commission was sexual misconduct in the ADF.

The Royal Commission dedicated a whole volume to sexual violence, unacceptable behaviour and military justice.

It's findings are chilling.

A core part of the Anzac Spirit is knowing your mate, and your team has your back when the chips are down.

The scourge of sexual violence within our Defence Force is completely inconsistent with this and we must do better in tackling this challenge.

Ensuring the wellbeing of our people isn't soft, it's about making sure we have the best warfighters ready when we need them.

There is no shying away from Defence still not getting this right.

Lots has been done but people – especially women – are still experiencing this behaviour.

This is not acceptable.

A key step to solving this is to first acknowledge this – and we do.

That is why there's a huge amount of work that's happening to continue to improve the wellbeing and safety of personnel - and it starts from the top, with better leadership accountability and greater transparency of progress against culture targets.

I think we can all agree that when it comes to this issue, our language can matter just as much as our actions.

And that is why Defence is now referring to all sexual and related offences, sexual harassment and sex discrimination as sexual violence, rather than sexual misconduct.

Defence is also working with the Australian Human Rights Commission on the implementation of the Defence Respect @ Work Framework – a specialist Defence system recognising the unique interface of military personnel, public servants and contractors at home and on deployment.

By the end of 2025 the Human Rights Commission will have delivered an initial assessment to inform Respect@Work Action Plans for each Service.

While the military justice system has a different function from the Australian criminal justice system, Australian civilian law also applies to ADF personnel.

Defence policies have been updated to not only more clearly define sexual offences and reporting requirements but also made training to manage sexual misconduct mandatory.

Not only does sexual violence cause serious harm to individuals, it undermines Defence, and impacts our operational effectiveness.

Inconsistent handling of cases and the continued presence of offenders within the ADF have eroded confidence in Defence's ability to keep its people safe.

If there's one message I want perpetrators to take from my address today – it's that if you engage in sexual violence – you can presume you no longer have a job in Defence.

In October, the Chief of the Defence Force released an Order of the Day reinforcing Defence's position that sexual violence has no place in the organisation. The Government will be backing this up with legislative force next year.

The Australian community expects that when ADF personnel are convicted of serious offences by a Court Martial or Defence Force Magistrate, those offences should be included in any criminal record check.

From next week, Defence will be reporting service convictions of sexual and related offences to the National Police reference system.

This means that personnel who commit civilian equivalent offences, can no longer hide their conduct within the Military Justice System.

The Royal Commission recommended that the Government commission an independent expert inquiry into military sexual violence in the ADF.

Today the Australian Human Rights Commission has opened consultation on the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry and we expect the Inquiry will commence mid next year.

The Australian Human Rights Commission will also lead research into the prevalence and effects of military sexual trauma that'll be completed by the end of 2026, and feed into the sexual misconduct inquiry.

In parallel, a great deal of work has been underway to improve the supports available for Defence families throughout our term – we've delivered better options, supports and flexibility for housing, as well as an expansion to the ADF Family Health Program, to name a few.

We've also been getting about making sure we're minimising the negative impacts of the posting cycle on Defence members and families by providing better visibility and flexibility of where a member might be posted across their careers.

The changes reflect our Defence and Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy.

We've delivered a Defence Workforce Plan and introduced two milestones in a Defence member's career where they will now become eligible for a continuation bonus.

These initiatives have been working.

In the last financial year separation from the ADF fell to just 7.9% - the lowest in over a decade and a massive drop from the 11.2% separation rate we inherited coming to Government, when the size of the ADF was going backwards.

So what does that mean?

That means the measures we're taking to support people in service, and their families are working, because they're choosing to stick around.

We've turned around what was a Defence recruitment crisis.

In the 2024-25 financial year, more than 7,050 people joined the ADF and Gap Year Program, the highest intake in 15 years.

We're also making sure employment opportunities within Defence are enhanced for people who can't be deployed.

Historically, ADF members who could not be deployed due to medical or other reasons, often faced career limitations or medical separation resulting in the loss of valuable skills and experience in our Defence workforce, as well as great anxiety for those affected.

Creating meaningful roles for non-deployable members not only helps address workforce pressures – it supports their mental health and wellbeing and that's why we've now developed career management guidance for non-deployable members to keep them in the ADF for longer.

The Royal Commission had a particular focus on the broader wellbeing of Defence personnel, veterans and families - aimed at preventing harm and supporting early intervention.

This means improving continuity of care in the system across the veteran community, whether it's a digger's first day on the job or decades later – people's service life impacts their life as a veteran, it's a continuum and making sure we approach it holistically is vitally important and that is why we produced the first ever Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

We're also working to better understand how we better support the health and wellbeing of Defence personnel, veterans and veteran families, with wide ranging research underway – taking action on a number of Royal Commission recommendations; co-ordinating research between Defence and DVA, together with external experts.

There's been a significant shift within the Department of Veterans' Affairs – indeed across the whole veteran eco-system – to have a deeper focus on a veterans' wellbeing.

The Albanese Government is providing \$78 million over four years to establish the new veteran and family wellbeing agency, and it'll be up and running in July 2026.

Through our new agency for veteran and family wellbeing there will be a renewed focus on successful transition from military to civilian life, community connection and improving wellbeing outcomes for veterans and families of veterans, delivering on recommendation 87 and providing for the coordinated delivery of related recommendations 80, 81 and 86.

The agency will focus on the overall wellbeing of veterans and families, while providing wrap around support for at risk veterans as they transition out of the Australian Defence Force.

Sadly, in the latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare statistics, the cohort most vulnerable to suicide remains those who transition out of the ADF involuntarily, including through medical or disciplinary grounds.

This makes it all the more important that the agency takes on transition support responsibilities that are currently shared between Defence and Veterans' Affairs, to make sure no one falls through the gaps. This will deliver recommendation 80.

The agency will also strengthen access to supports across the nation – working with the DVA Veteran Access Network, Open Arms and our Veterans' and Families' Hub network to make sure that there is sufficient, sustainably funded, reliable, coordinated and accessible support across the country.

Importantly, this new agency will have a remit for complex case management, wellbeing service coordination, referral concierge and a hotline.

The Royal Commission said that access to enhanced care for service related conditions is essential to improving wellbeing outcomes.

Veterans often find they're better able to express and process emotions and experiences that may be difficult to put into words, manage stress and connect with others when they're undertaking somewhat unconventional rehabilitation activities – things like creative and sporting activities with other veterans.

This is something veterans can now formally access through DVA.

We are also continuing to roll out Veterans' and Families' Hubs and new veteran housing and homelessness support across the country.

Veterans can now get access to the most up to date treatments and rehabilitation options – whether that is through world leading PTSD treatments using MDMA and Psilocybin for treatment resistant depression, targeted pain relief using medical cannabis, rehabilitation for joint pain, specific tinnitus treatments or the Psychiatric Assistance Dogs.

We're working to make sure veterans have access to high-quality, comprehensive and coordinated care from their clinical team.

From 1 July 2026 we'll be rolling out veteran specific mental health care plan funding to support GPs and psychiatrists providing proactive, continuous and connected care for veterans experiencing mental health conditions.

We are also undertaking a refresh of the eligibility and program requirements for the Coordinated Veterans Care program, to broaden eligibility. An advisory panel will be set up to make sure we get this right.

We're also thinking outside the box, with initiatives like the ground-breaking group-based *PTSD Trauma Recovery Program* that's run by Open Arms in Hobart – so Tasmanian veterans can better access support, without unnecessarily needing to travel to the mainland. We're expanding that across the nation.

We're working to address the critical knowledge and evidence gaps in the treatment of PTSD and other mental health conditions as identified by the Royal Commission.

Despite the condition's treatability, we're seeing a growth in PTSD focused claims, making it clear that current evidence, treatment options and the workforce are not fully meeting veterans' needs.

We're working to improve the quality and translation of this research. We will partner with organisations delivering and trialling innovative mental health treatments and expand the availability of military aware mental health professionals.

DVA is also working more closely with Defence on preventative actions to avoid or mitigate injuries in service.

By making sure veterans access better, modern prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, we're getting in early, before conditions deteriorate or become chronic, with all the negative ongoing lifestyle impacts that entails.

Overall, it is not enough to simply increase the Department of Veterans' Affairs capability, we must also secure the integrity of the veteran support system, to ensure veterans and families receive the best possible care from those who have their wellbeing at heart.

An unintended consequence of speeding up claims processing, is a rise in concerning behaviour from paid and commission-based advocates, as well as a concerning rise in inappropriate and sometimes illegal profiteering by providers, to the detriment of veterans.

Instances of fraud and inappropriate advocate/practitioner relationships mean we are tightening compliance measures to ensure the system, and indeed veterans themselves, are not exploited.

We're updating our fee schedule for report writing, ensuring payments for reports are more consistent with other equivalent jurisdictions and better reflect actual costs to practitioners.

These compliance measures are to ensure taxpayer dollars are going where they should – to veteran support.

These updates to DVA's compliance rules will not be noticed by the vast majority of practitioners who act with integrity.

DVA will also ensure it supports veterans who have found themselves impacted by such practices.

I also really encourage veterans to work with their usual treating GPs on medical reports for DVA, rather than going to a new provider who might not know them very well.

Volunteer veteran advocates have been a core part of Australia's veteran support system for over a century, with '*mates supporting mates*' being a founding principle, but, as we've heard in a recent Senate Inquiry, some very concerning behaviours have emerged.

I was enraged to hear evidence that veterans are being charged staggering fees – things like \$20,000 for a single days work by an advocate and charging commissions as high as 29 per cent of a veteran's DVA compensation payment.

We've even heard of \$20,000 contract break fees and a charge of more than \$30,000 for a single report.

The commercialisation of this system began when the backlog of claims blew out under the former government – with commercial advocates making false promises that they can get a veteran's claim processed faster.

I am grateful for the Senate Committee's work in looking into this behaviour and to Senator Lambie for her partnership in bringing forward the Inquiry.

As a Government we agree to committee recommendations relating to better regulation of the advocacy system and we will consult with the sector on constraints to better protect our veterans from unscrupulous advocates, while not over-regulating a largely volunteer service.

We will provide funding to the new Institute of Veterans' Advocacy to act as the professional association for veteran advocates that will ensure more advocates are appropriately trained, qualified and required to comply with ethics and conduct rules.

Entities applying for Government Building Excellence in Support and Training - BEST - Grant funding will be required to utilise advocates registered with the Institute.

Advocates that charge fees will also be required to be members of the Institute and comply with its rules regarding fee structures in order to eradicate egregious charging behaviours.

We will work closely with the sector in developing a fit for purpose model, to ensure good access to advocates while protecting veterans.

In order to better support the advocacy system, and noting the strain on ex-service organisations in funding free advocates, we are more than doubling funding to the BEST program to enable more advocates to deliver services that will be free for veterans and giving organisations greater future funding certainty – implementing Recommendation 99 of the Royal Commission's final report.

I want to be really clear with veterans and veteran families on this one - when choosing to use or recommend an advocate, you do not need to pay for something you can and will get for free.

I encourage all veterans and veteran families to find a qualified, free-to-use advocate to support you on DVA's advocacy register.

Anzac Day and Remembrance Day are powerful reminders of the enduring cost of war and the immense sacrifice made by those who have given their lives in the service of our nation.

As we remember the fallen, we also remain steadfastly focused on the wellbeing of the living every day.

We now face the most complex set of strategic circumstances since the Second World War.

It is in our national interest to protect the wellbeing of those who protect us, after all - *"For what they have done, this we will do"*

The Royal Commission's task for us as a government is no small feat... this is the most comprehensive reform to the systems, processes and culture to support Defence personnel, veterans and families ever undertaken in Australia.

This will ensure defence personnel, veterans and families receive the care, services and supports they not only need, but they deserve.

I want to see Australians attracted to serving in our ADF; confident that they and their families will be well supported by their leaders, their mates and the broader Defence organisation – both during and following their time in service.

We want our personnel to be safe in the knowledge that whatever may happen in service, they, and their families will be looked after, and acknowledged by a grateful nation.

Thank you.

ENDS

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