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The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister

Senator The Hon. Linda Reynolds CSC
Minister for Defence

The Hon. Darren Chester MP
Minister for Veterans and Defence Personnel

Wednesday 5 February 2020

POWERFUL NEW BODY TO TACKLE ADF AND VETERAN SUICIDES

A powerful, new independent body will be created to investigate all suspected veteran and Australian Defence Force (ADF) suicides and causes to help save lives.

The Morrison Government will establish a permanent National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention.

The National Commissioner will have the enduring power, scope and resources to investigate suicides and related issues as they arise, rather than being restricted by a one-off review looking at past practices.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the independent Commissioner would also have the power to compel witnesses to give evidence.

"This is about being forever vigilant for the care and well-being of our veterans," the Prime Minister said.

"Those veterans and all serving men and women protect our community and our freedoms. It is our duty to do the same for them.

"I have thought long and hard about the best response to this issue. I have spoken to veterans right across Australia and I have met with their families and also local, state and national organisations.

"I believe what we have developed addresses the needs of those veterans, their families and our serving men and women.

“We will be permanently vigilant about their welfare.”

The National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention will be empowered to perform two roles:

- The Commissioner will be an independent and permanent public accountability body, with the same powers of a Royal Commission to compel the production of evidence and summon witnesses, and make findings and recommendations to Government.
- The Commissioner will also provide an ongoing investigative function of individual cases of suicide, working with each state and territory coronial office, making recommendations to Government.

The Government will invest an initial \$40 million to support the Commissioner’s work and this will be expanded to ensure they have whatever resources they need.

The Government will also establish an immediate, independent review of historical veteran suicide cases, conducted by the Commissioner, focusing on the impact of military service and veterans’ post service experience.

An interim report will be delivered within 12 months. Families will be engaged in this process if they wish, with an opportunity to participate and tell their stories openly and safely.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, along with coronial and legal experts, will provide technical expertise in support of this work.

Minister for Veterans and Defence Personnel Darren Chester said the Commissioner would also deliver an Annual Veteran and Defence Suicide Death Report to the Parliament.

“This will be a transparent report directly to the Parliament on an annual basis on suicides within the defence and veteran community, including an update on the implementation and evaluation of measures to reduce suicide risk factors,” Mr Chester said.

“The Government is committed to ensuring ADF members, veterans and their families have access to the right support, at the right time, especially those who are vulnerable or at risk.”

Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds CSC said the Chief of the Defence Force and each Service Chief was committed to being open and transparent, to support improved health outcomes for ADF personnel and veterans.

“The mental health and wellbeing of our vets and Defence Force members is an issue of national and enduring importance.

“These comprehensive measures have been developed with a very clear focus on finding the most effective and practical ways of better identifying, preventing, understanding and acting on suicide and suicide risks among our vets and service men and women.”

A Veteran Family Advocate will also be appointed to directly engage with the families of veterans, to improve the design of all veteran programs and services, including mental health supports and services.

“The new Veteran Family Advocate will focus on mental health and suicide prevention, and contribute to our understanding of risk factors relating to the wellbeing of veterans and their families, particularly during transition from the ADF,” Mr Chester said.

“The Advocate will represent the views of veterans and their families by engaging and advocating to help shape policy and the administration of veteran benefits and support.

“We want to assure defence and veterans’ families that help is available now and it can make a difference. Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling provides support and counselling to current ADF members, veterans and their families and can be contacted 24/7 on 1800 011 046.”

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