

# NSW Veterans Strategy

2021–2024

A whole-of-government strategy and  
a whole-of-community approach for  
veterans and their families



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### Acknowledgement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Connection to the land is important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and they have served and continue to serve with honour among our military forces defending their ancestral lands from which they came to serve Australia. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and the waters and show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging.

### Acknowledgement to our veterans

We would like to thank veterans and their families for their service and their sacrifice. We appreciate their willingness to tell their stories and recognise their resilience.





# Foreword from the Premier and Minister



NSW has a diverse veteran community comprising more than 200,000 former Australian Defence Force personnel.

The NSW Government is committed to honouring our veterans and the sacrifices they have made in the service of our nation. We particularly want to ensure our veterans enjoy a smooth transition from military service to civilian life, with opportunities to continue developing their skills and participate fully in society.

Our flagship NSW Veterans Strategy brings together the NSW Government initiatives available to veterans in NSW.

These programs provide access to pathways into education and employment, connections to community and targeted services that respond to specific needs for secure housing, health and veterans' wellbeing.



We offer ex-service personnel a range of concessions, while our Veterans Employment Program has supported hundreds of veterans into jobs in the NSW Public Service. We are also committed to supporting families and spouses, for whom life in service can involve disrupted living arrangements, moves and absences.

Our programs have been developed in consultation with thousands of veterans and their support networks, which has given us insight into veteran interests, and the barriers and enablers to a fulfilling life after service.

The NSW Government acknowledges and thanks every veteran, family member and support organisation for their contribution to this Strategy. We are committed to continuing this valuable conversation and building on our service to the NSW veteran community.

THE HON GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN MP  
NSW PREMIER

THE HON DR GEOFF LEE MP  
MINISTER FOR VETERANS

# Message from the Parliamentary Secretary for Veterans



This NSW Government Veterans Strategy belongs to each and every veteran across our great State. The Strategy recognises the complex challenges our veterans face and highlights their successes. As the grandson, son and brother-in-law of veterans, it has been a privilege to make a small contribution to the development of this strategy in my role as the Parliamentary Secretary.

The generosity of the veteran community in sharing their expertise and insights, places them and their experiences at the heart of this Strategy and recognises the important role our veterans have in communities right across NSW. I extend my gratitude to each of the organisations and individuals who provided valuable input into this first of its kind, whole-of-government NSW Veterans Strategy.

MR JAMES GRIFFIN MP  
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR VETERANS

## A guide to acronyms

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <b>ABS</b>       | Australian Bureau of Statistics                                     |
| <b>ACI</b>       | Agency for Clinical Innovation (NSW Government, part of NSW Health) |
| <b>ADF</b>       | Australian Defence Force  |
| <b>AIHW</b>      | Australian Institute of Health and Welfare                          |
| <b>CALD</b>      | Culturally and linguistically diverse                               |
| <b>DCJ</b>       | Department of Communities and Justice (NSW Government)              |
| <b>DCS</b>       | Department of Customer Service (NSW Government)                     |
| <b>DPC</b>       | Department of Premier and Cabinet (NSW Government)                  |
| <b>DPIE</b>      | Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (NSW Government)   |
| <b>DVA</b>       | Department of Veterans' Affairs (Australian Government)             |
| <b>EDUCATION</b> | Department of Education (NSW Government)                            |
| <b>ESO</b>       | Ex-Service Organisation   |
| <b>LGNSW</b>     | Local Government NSW (peak organisation for local councils)         |
| <b>NCVH</b>      | National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare                            |
| <b>NSW VS</b>    | NSW Veterans Strategy   |
| <b>OLG</b>       | Office of Local Government (NSW Government)                         |
| <b>OOS</b>       | NSW Office of Sport (NSW Government)                                |
| <b>OVA</b>       | NSW Office for Veterans Affairs (NSW Government)                    |
| <b>PAMS</b>      | Premier's Anzac Memorial Scholarship                                |
| <b>PTSD</b>      | Post-traumatic stress disorder                                      |
| <b>RSL NSW</b>   | The Returned and Services League of Australia (NSW Branch)          |
| <b>SES</b>       | State Emergency Service (NSW Government)                            |
| <b>SNSW</b>      | Service NSW (NSW Government)  |
| <b>STEM</b>      | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics                    |
| <b>TAFE NSW</b>  | Technical and Further Education NSW (NSW Government)                |
| <b>TFNSW</b>     | Transport for NSW (NSW Government)                                  |
| <b>VSA</b>       | Veteran Sport Australia   |
| <b>WNSW</b>      | Women NSW (NSW Government)  |

# The Strategy



# About this Strategy

This flagship NSW Veterans Strategy (NSW VS) implements a whole of Government and whole of community approach to the important role veterans play in NSW. Developing the NSW VS provided an opportunity to focus on what veterans need and want. We have heard from veterans through surveys and focus groups, and we have reviewed research from across Australia and internationally to bolster existing, and create new, programs for veterans in NSW.

The NSW Government already delivers a range of programs targeted at recognising and supporting veterans, but this is the first time that the programs across the whole of Government and community have been brought together in one place. The NSW VS should be read in conjunction with the Veterans Strategy Action Plan 2021-2024.

The Strategy outlines the focus NSW will take to Veterans Affairs during the next 4 years. The Action Plan outlines specific commitments and targets to achieve those goals, and will be updated during the course of the Strategy.

## The Veterans Strategy at a glance

| Focus                                  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>1 RECOGNITION AND COMMEMORATION</b> | The service and sacrifice of every veteran is recognised across the state, in every community.<br><br>Across NSW, commemoration brings communities together to recognise the service of veterans and their families, and to value the contribution they make to society.  |
| <b>2 EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT</b>      | Veterans and their partners can participate in education and employment, in a way that recognises their service and sacrifice.<br><br>Finding the right job or training is crucial for a rewarding civilian life. It also makes good business sense for organisations to access the skills and experience of well-trained veterans. |
| <b>3 COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTEERING</b>    | Veterans are an active and valued part of our community.<br><br>As well as benefiting the community, volunteering has personal benefits, as volunteers often experience reduced symptoms of depression and lower mortality, perceive their health to be better, and expand skills and networks.                                     |
| <b>4 SUPPORT</b>                       | Veterans with additional needs receive the support and services they require.<br><br>Providing the right supports can require a flexible approach that reflects the diversity of veterans, their families, and their needs.   |

## Structure of the Strategy and Action Plan

| Focus   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>1 PROCESS</b>                                | Developing the NSW VS involved listening directly to veterans through a survey and focus groups, an extensive review of current research and other knowledge about the needs of veterans in Australia and elsewhere, and input from every NSW Government Department about their programs for veterans.  |
| <b>2 CONTEXT</b>                                | We estimate that there are over 200,000 veterans in NSW, with around 1,200 new veterans joining our community each year. The NSW Government works collaboratively with the Australian Government, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) which has primary responsibility for support for veterans, to make sure veterans are recognised in NSW. |
| <b>3 WHAT WE FOUND</b>                          | The research and what veterans themselves told us shaped this Strategy and created the four themes.   |
| <b>4 THE FOUR THEMES: RESPONSES AND ACTIONS</b> | The Strategy explores the four themes – Recognition and Commemoration, Education and Employment, Community and Volunteering and Support – in more detail, unpacking what veterans told us, what the research says, and how this Strategy responds to those needs.   |
| <b>5 ACTIONS</b>                                | The Action Plan contains 57 Actions across the NSW Government.  |
| <b>6 GOVERNANCE</b>                             | This Strategy and Action Plan are the first step in a new approach for veterans' support and services. More information on governance is found on page 33.  |

Interlaced through the document are highlight boxes that delve into the experiences of individual veterans and some of the programs we offer in more detail.

## Veterans in NSW

An estimated 200,000+ ex-ADF members live across NSW. Of those, almost 56,000 veterans and 30,000 family members of veterans are current clients of DVA<sup>1</sup>. Almost 60% of them live in Regional NSW. Every year around 1,200 service members leave the ADF to live in NSW. Around 40% of these veterans move to Sydney, and almost 50% move to coastal regional areas<sup>2</sup>.

Over time, in NSW and across Australia, the number of veterans is slowly declining. Just as the general population is ageing, so too are veterans in NSW. This trend is stronger amongst veterans, due to the lessening of military conflict. In a 2018 study, almost half (47%) of men who served were aged 65 or over, with just under one-quarter (23%) of women in the same age group<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> DVA Pensioners and Treatment Card Holders by Local Government Area as at 3 April 2020  
<sup>2</sup> Defence Annual Report 2018-19, Chapter 6, Strategic Workforce Management p.93  
<sup>3</sup> AIHW Profile of Veterans 2018



**Almost  
60% live in  
Regional  
NSW**

The needs of veterans are changing over time, in part reflecting the increasing participation of women in the ADF and the changing nature of military service and military conflict.

The ageing population has implications for how veterans participate in the community and in commemoration activities. It also has implications for the organisations that support veterans, particularly older veterans.

For younger veterans, support and commemoration activities need to align with changing priorities and expectations to remain relevant and meaningful.

Improving our understanding of the veteran population is a priority, and for the first time the 2021 Census will include a question on whether someone has served in the ADF. This will help us better understand the profile of ex-ADF members in NSW, their needs, and how NSW can better support them in their civilian lives.

### Who are our veterans?

In the NSW VS, veterans include all ex-serving personnel who served at least one day in the Australian Defence Force, including reservists, people who experienced operational deployments and peacekeeping missions, and people who served in peacetime.



**Education  
is key to  
quality  
of life**

### Shaping the Strategy

This first NSW VS is shaped by three clear considerations:

- What veterans themselves say is important for them – to find this out, an online survey and forums provided veterans in NSW with the opportunity to share their views and highlight the issues they and their families face.
- What the research says makes a difference in the lives of veterans – a comprehensive literature review surfaced the key findings around veteran health and wellbeing.
- The role of the NSW Government – both through the programs already being offered to veterans, and the gaps identified through veteran and research input.

The survey, focus groups and the research collectively gave us a rich picture of the demands placed upon NSW veterans and their personal concerns. The following table shows how the concerns of veterans and the insight from research shaped the themes in this Strategy.

| This source     | Offered these insights   | Which shaped these themes            |
|-----------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Veterans</b> | Veterans value commemoration; different approaches are appreciated by those of different ages and experiences.<br>In veterans' experience, the community image has not kept pace with diverse demographics and the beliefs of veterans themselves.   | <b>Recognition and commemoration</b> |
| <b>Research</b> | Commemoration days bring communities together.<br>Our memorials value the experiences and contributions of veterans; but some memorials are ageing and not all veterans feel that they are representative of their service.<br>Young people are crucial to continued community recognition of service.   |                                      |
| <b>Veterans</b> | It can seem hard for veterans to know how to translate service into civilian employment requirements.<br>Further education seems costly and overwhelming; yet education can be a valuable support for establishing a new direction and career.<br>Partners may also need assistance to recommence employment.  | <b>Education and employment</b>      |
| <b>Research</b> | The ability of veterans to access education and employment opportunities is a key contributor to long-term wellbeing.<br>Education is key for veterans' quality of life.<br>Families of veterans also need support to participate in education and employment.   |                                      |
| <b>Veterans</b> | Veterans say their identity is linked to a sense of purpose, and they want to continue to contribute to community after leaving service.<br>Women veterans say that they find it hard to connect with others with similar experience. (This may be because of the historically smaller numbers who served on operations before the 1990s).<br>Navigating the wide array of civilian activities can be a challenge, and a warm welcome by communities makes it easier to build connected lives. | <b>Community and volunteering</b>    |
| <b>Research</b> | For ex-service personnel, there are many ways to connect with community.<br>Sport and physical fitness are important for wellbeing and also create social connection.<br>Older veterans can have a different experience of ageing.   |                                      |
| <b>Veterans</b> | Concessions from the state and local government make a difference.<br>Get help when you need it.<br>The whole family has needs relating to the veteran's service – strong families offer better support to veterans themselves.  | <b>Support</b>                       |
| <b>Research</b> | Mainstream systems can be difficult to navigate.<br>The demands of service can be associated with significant health and wellbeing issues.<br>Some veterans face challenges with homelessness.<br>Innovative approaches such as assistance animal programs can help.   |                                      |

We discuss the findings from the research and from what veterans themselves said in each of the themes.

# Themes

## The work of NSW Government departments

Every NSW Government department was invited to participate in this Strategy, both by recognising those services that already provide important support for veterans, and through shaping new programs and services to extend the support provided. These programs and services are recognised in the Action Plan.

## NSW and Australian Governments, working together to support veterans

The Australian Government, largely through DVA, has primary and legislated responsibility for programs that support ex-serving members and their families. This includes transition pathways, specialist health care and other approved conditions, financial support, pensions and compensation, counselling and rehabilitation.

Nevertheless, many veterans do not access DVA assistance after transitioning from the ADF, and less than half of all veterans are currently DVA clients<sup>4</sup>. The NSW Government plays an important part in ensuring veterans live full and satisfying lives, making sure they have access to mainstream services such as health, education, transport, and housing, and that these services are appropriate for veterans' needs.

The NSW and Australian Governments work collaboratively and with peak ex-service organisations, to recognise and commemorate veterans' service through memorials, events, and learning opportunities that encourage remembrance.

The NSW Office for Veterans Affairs (OVA) is the lead for NSW responses to veterans. As well as leading heritage and many commemoration activities, OVA provides targeted programs and grants that support veterans to access employment and education opportunities that are critical for long-term wellbeing, and works with other government departments and peak bodies to shape these programs.



**NSW and Australian Governments working together**

## Veterans and their families: in their own words

Just over 2,000 individual veterans, reservists, family members, and supporters gave their input to the NSW VS through an online survey.

Further, 16 online focus groups were attended by more than 140 veterans, their family members, support providers, and advocates. People joined the focus groups from South Western NSW, the Riverina, the South Coast, Southern Highlands, Central West, Greater Sydney area, the Hunter, Far North Coast, and North West NSW. Three of the focus groups were targeted conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans, women veterans,

and young veterans to discuss their specific experiences and needs. A special veterans employment roundtable was also held at Parliament House, attended by key organisations that employ and support veterans into employment to hear their views.

In the focus groups, people were generous in sharing their experiences as veterans, partners and families, the supports they receive from NSW Government services, and what would make a difference for them in the future. Their input was invaluable in shaping the NSW VS and providing direction for the future.

<sup>4</sup> This may change over time, as eligibility is expanded for supports such as mental health treatment under the White Card.



ANZAC DAY MARCH,  
SYDNEY 2017.  
PHOTO BY SALTY  
DINGO



# Recognition and Commemoration

## Outcome

**The service and sacrifice of every veteran is honoured across the state, in every community.**

Across NSW, communities honour veterans and their families and express their thanks for veterans' service. The challenges of service are unlike any other role in society.

Commemorations honour the past service of veterans and recognise the ongoing contribution of contemporary serving personnel. Our memorials and commemorative activities are enduring testaments to their contribution, both as individuals and through stories of their collective efforts. The NSW Government works closely with RSL NSW, local government and communities to enable recognition and commemoration.

Commemorative activities and memorials continue to evolve to reflect the diversity of veterans and their experiences. On commemorative days such as Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, communities unite at memorials to remember the service of veterans across many generations.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served in the military since the Boer War and their service is honoured and recognised on all memorial days.

All of us, young and old, can join in honouring contribution. For young people particularly, education and engagement activities build understanding and appreciation of service.

## Veterans say...

**Veterans value commemoration: different approaches are appreciated by those of different ages and experiences**

Veterans were united in their appreciation of the recognition given during events for Anzac Day, Remembrance Day and other commemorations. They are heartened by the growing number of young people and families attending these events and recognising the importance of their service.

Veterans told us that different approaches were important. In 2020, Anzac Day was observed in individual communities and on individual streets, due to COVID-19, and many veterans reflected that this brought them closer to their neighbours as they shared their experiences of service. They encouraged us to continue to design new ways to ensure events were appropriate for those with different service experiences and of different backgrounds.



^  
ANZAC DAY MARCH,  
SYDNEY 2017. PHOTO  
BY SALTY DINGO



**Over 3200  
memorials  
recognising  
veterans**



**Education  
and engagement  
activities build  
understanding  
and appreciation**

*“My heart fills with so much pride when I go to a cenotaph, I get blown away. Anzac Day is better than Christmas.”*

**The community image of veterans has not kept pace with the changing demographics and beliefs of veterans themselves**

The veterans we heard from were from diverse backgrounds. They were young and old, male and female, multigenerational Australian, more newly arrived and Aboriginal. The participants observed that service has also changed, increasingly focused on peacekeeping activities. Veterans wanted to hear stories and see commemoration that reflected the diversity of modern service.

*“People don’t know what a modern-day veteran is: one of the challenges we have moving forward is trying to re-establish what is a veteran.”*



... aim to inspire a love of learning about our Anzac history

## What we know from research about recognition and commemoration

### Commemorative days bring communities together

Across NSW, commemorative days such as Anzac Day bring communities together to recognise the service of veterans and their families, and to value the contribution they make to society.

We remember those who have served during peacetime, those who served in major military conflicts and peacekeeping missions. We recognise our older veterans and contemporary veterans whose experience of service and military conflict have changed significantly.

Commemorative days continue to be significant events for veterans, service personnel, families, and the wider community. Participation at Anzac Day events has increased significantly in recent years, both in person and, as technology adapts, digitally. Between 2016 and 2019 around 10,000 to 12,000 people attended the Anzac Day Dawn Service at Martin Place in Sydney, and around 60,000-70,000 people attended the traditional Sydney march.

### Our memorials value the experiences and contributions of veterans; but memorials are ageing and don't always recognise diversity

Tributes to veterans are embedded in our community, from landmark statues to parks, memorial halls and sports facilities, and commemorative venues. These memorials support the community to remember and honour the cultural significance of veterans and their service.

There are over 3,200 memorials, recognising veterans from all conflicts and cultural backgrounds across the state, in city suburbs and regional communities. The first Australian to die on overseas service in the Sudan War is commemorated by a memorial founded in 1886. Most memorials were created in response to the First World War. A potent symbol of loss and sacrifice, war memorials tell an important story about the way that communities recognise and portray communal grief and individual sacrifice. As historian Ken Inglis explains, *war memorials embody a complex range of cultural values and associations. They can signal 'exaltation, pride, gratitude and mourning'*<sup>5</sup>.

Memorials act as a site at which veterans can connect and serve as a visible symbol of recognition and commemoration in the community. They also assist in the telling of stories of significance. As our memorials age, it is important to ensure they are preserved for future generations to learn about service.

Ongoing education is an important part of commemoration and Australia's role in defence and military engagement is represented across the curriculum in a variety of ways. Engaging young people in history, the contemporary military, and the challenges of service improves their appreciation of Australia's heritage and the difference that individuals and the collective can make.



SMOKING CEREMONY IN THE ANZAC MEMORIAL'S HALL OF SERVICE, 18 OCTOBER 2018. PHOTO BY PENNY BRADFIELD COURTESY AUSPIC\_DPS

## Recognising service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made an important and valuable contribution to the defence force since at least the Boer War. Research indicates that over 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people served in the First World War, and they continue to serve.

To recognise this service, we hold a commemorative ceremony annually at the Anzac Memorial in National Reconciliation Week to honour the service and sacrifice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans. The event includes a smoking ceremony and the laying of wreaths, bringing together former serving officers, school children and family.

Two specially commissioned artworks offer an ongoing remembrance of service in and around the Anzac Memorial.

*The Home Soil*, an installation by Fiona Hall in the Hall of Service at the Anzac Memorial, is a collection of soil from 1,701 NSW towns, cities, suburbs and homesteads given as a home address by First World War enlistees. This includes soil from places that are meaningful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans, including Brewarrina, Lilyfield, Bondi, North Bondi and Weilmoringle (northern NSW). Aboriginal elders were consulted in the collections from these sites, in one case providing Gidgee ash rather than removing soil from the location.

*"During the annual commemoration held at the Anzac Memorial, the first wreath is placed in the Pool of Reflection. An elder passes the wreath on to two students and symbolises the traditional connection between the water, the earth and the sky."*

<sup>5</sup> Ken Inglis 2008 *Sacred Places*, Third Edition. Carlton: Melbourne University Press Limited p.445



<  
PAMS SCHOLAR SIENA LUCAS AT A COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVE ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 2019. PHOTO COURTESY ANDREW PHELPS, 2019 PAMS SCHOLAR

THEME 2

# Education and Employment

## Outcome

**Veterans and their partners are able to fully participate in education and employment in a way that recognises their service and sacrifice.**

Around 1,200 ADF personnel leave service and settle into civilian life in NSW each year. Those veterans will create a new direction for their lives and that of their families. Key for most veterans is how to participate in economic life by finding new employment.

For many, this period of transition is critical. Finding the right job or training is crucial for a rewarding civilian life. It also makes good business sense for organisations to access the skills and experience of well-trained veterans. As well as technical skills gained in service – whether logistics, engineering and mechanical, navigation, aviation or defensive driving – veterans gain many highly desirable business skills. These can include people management, communication, problem solving, strategic and operational planning, and project management.

Veterans are often accompanied on the pathway to participation by partners, spouses and families. Just as their support during service was important for veterans, they too may benefit from support as they find new work and new purpose in a changed environment.

## Veterans say...

### It can be hard for veterans to know how to translate service into civilian employment requirements

Veterans told us that the period in which they transitioned from service to civilian life, considered education and sought employment, could be a difficult time. While some found it relatively straightforward, most said it was hard to adjust to the civilian workplace.

Many found it hard to translate their ADF qualifications and experience to the NSW workforce when applying for jobs. Programs that supported them to translate military language into the civilian employment context were highly valued, as was support for access to interviews.

*“You have lots of experience, but what does it count for?”*

*“When we started, we were very young; when I got out there was no recognition of my education.”*

One critical observation was that hiring managers did not always understand the skills like leadership, teamwork, communication and logistics, that veterans could have.

*“Not many employers were aware of how much skill ex-defence personnel have.”*

## Premier’s Anzac Memorial Scholarship (PAMS)

Each year, students from 20 schools across NSW (selected by ballot) are given the opportunity to visit sites overseas and in Australia that are significant in Australian military history. Students visit memorials and battlefields where Australians fought to learn about the causes of the First and Second World Wars, and to commemorate their service.

The students are accompanied by teachers and an historian to support their learning. To prepare for the tour, each student researches an Australian who served and makes a presentation to the group during the tour.

For the students the tour is a profound experience. In their words:

*“The PAMS tour opened my eyes to the sheer unprecedented scale of the deaths and casualties of World War One, something that numbers in a textbook can’t do.”*

*“Experiences included a formal ceremony at the Menin Gate Memorial in Belgium, as well as a service prepared collectively by the scholars for the ‘Spreading of the Ashes’ which represented fallen NSW soldiers. Through these ceremonies, or more simple acts, such as sitting alongside the grave of a soldier, we could show our gratefulness for the freedoms and liberties offered to us and reflect upon the importance of recognising those who made this possible.”*

*“I found visiting the Dachau Concentration Camp reinforced to me the importance of raising awareness and educating younger generations about the atrocities of the Wars and the need to prevent similar situations in our own lifetimes.”*

*“Amongst World War I and World War II battlefields and memorials, I gained a greater sense of empathy and appreciation for the sacrifices made by Australian servicemen.”*

### Further education seems costly and overwhelming; yet education can be a valuable support for establishing a new direction and career

For those considering education, the vast array of educational programs could be confusing. Many veterans told us they felt unsure about which options were most suitable for their skills and interests. They also told us that costs associated with further education were greater than they could cover. They spoke highly of programs that attempted to bridge the cost gap, or which offered a fast track into universities or TAFE NSW. For those who undertook training or degrees, it opened pathways to new domains.

*“Education is critical: now I’m as important as everybody else.”*

### Partners may also need assistance to recommence employment

Partners and spouses may struggle to find employment as many have put their own career on hold to support their partner’s career. Both veterans and their partners and spouses told us that it can be hard for partners to identify how their skills can translate into employment, and that support for career advice and training could be invaluable.

*“I feel totally unemployable. I don’t know how to fill in a resume after years of caring for my partner.”*

## What we know from research about participation

### The ability of veterans to access education and employment opportunities is a key contributor to long-term wellbeing

As with other key issues for veterans, employment outcomes can be linked to effective transition supports. The Productivity Commission found that there is a “sound economic case for good transition support, as smooth transitions contribute to the wellbeing of veterans and their families, potentially increase labour force participation, and reduce reliance on other forms of support.”<sup>6</sup> When profiling veterans, a 2018 AIHW report found that 62% of people aged 18-64 who had served in the ADF were employed and working full time and 13% were working part time<sup>7</sup>.

### Education is key for quality of life

Education is also important: for example, higher educational attainment for ADF peacekeepers is associated with better long-term outcomes, including better health and quality of life<sup>8</sup>.

For some veterans, this can mean gaining new educational qualifications: in 2015, 2 in 10 (20%) ADF personnel who had recently left the ADF had a university degree (Van Hooff et al. 2018)<sup>9</sup>.



**Education can be a valuable support for establishing a new direction and career**



DEFENCE COMMUNITY ORGANISATION WELCOME EVENT, LUNA PARK. COURTESY DEFENCE.GOV.AU



**Families of veterans also need support**

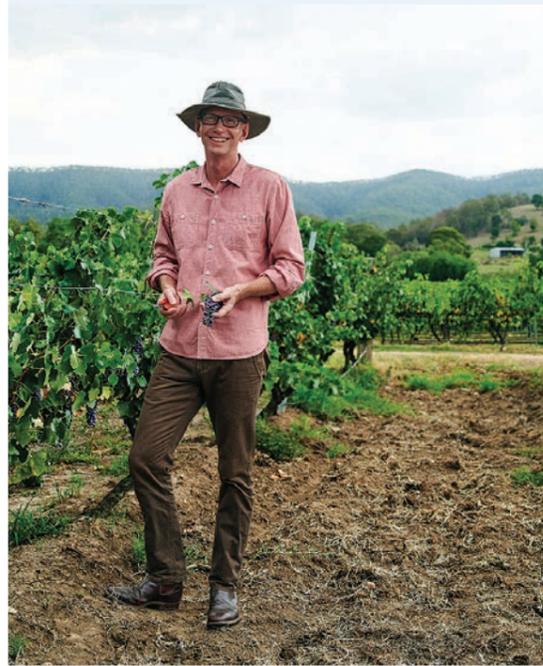
### Families of veterans may need support to participate in education and employment

Most families of ADF members are resilient and find good ways of coping. Families change residential patterns, going from moving frequently when in the ADF to settling longer post transition, and the changed pattern means that spouses/partners are more likely to be employed. Nevertheless, the families of veterans report having a higher chance of experiencing financial hardship (Smart et al 2018)<sup>10</sup>. This means that family members may need support to find their way into the job market or into further education.

*“I couldn’t afford to start again; it was quite difficult to leave the Navy because none of the education was recognised.”*

6 Productivity Commission 2019. *A Better Way to Support Veterans*, Overview and Recommendations, Report no. 93, Canberra  
7 A Profile of Australia’s Veterans 2018, AIHW  
8 Hawthorne G, Korn S & Creamer M 2014. Australian peacekeepers: long-term mental health status, health service use, and quality of life—summary report. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.  
9 A profile of Australia’s veterans 2018, 2018, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Cat. no. PHE 235, Canberra: AIHW.  
10 Family Wellbeing Study Part 1: Families of current and ex-serving ADF members: Health and wellbeing

## New careers: Veterans Education Program and Ranks to Recognition



James, a former squadron leader with the RAAF, always loved aircraft and aviation. In a career starting in the UK Royal Air Force and moving to the RAAF in 2008, James worked as a navigator, delivered training courses and developed planning process documents.

As his service career came to an end and James transitioned to become a reservist, he started planning his future goals. His ultimate goal is to own and operate a boutique winery in the Hunter, one which reinforces the idea of family, community and care for the environment.

James received support from the NSW Government Ranks to Recognition program which worked with James to clarify his goals, help him sort through viticulture course requirements and assist with his enrolment.

The Veterans Education Scholarship Program provided funding for James to train at TAFE NSW. These programs are included in the action plan.

## Local Government as a Preferred Employer



Sean Baker was an Army Combat Engineer. After 8 years' service, he made a successful transition to working for Sutherland Shire Council.

Sean's technical expertise and ability to read plans and construction drawings, combined with formal training in Project Management and experience in team leadership, meant he was able to move immediately to a job in stormwater management with the Council after he left service.

*"The Council really valued my experience and there was a good match of my skills to their needs."*

## THEME 3

# Community and Volunteering

## Outcome

**Veterans participate in inclusive communities.**

Life in service is rich in connections, activity and meaning. Service places a focus on the team, creating a culture of mutual support and connection. For some, transitioning to civilian life can create a sense of disconnection and a need for additional meaning. For others, moving from a time of intense structured activity to an absence of structure can also mean the loss of connection to sport and other fitness activities that help both body and mind. Yet even when veterans have experienced physical or psychological injuries, they have the capacity to lead active, purposeful and fulfilling lives. Connecting into what the local community can offer can be invaluable for veterans.

The concept of service and contribution is just as important for civilian communities. Volunteering is crucial for our society and for the economy. The NSW Volunteering Strategy 2020–2030 estimates that more than 2 million people in NSW volunteer their time to others. As well as benefiting the community, volunteering has personal benefits, as volunteers often experience reduced symptoms of depression and lower mortality, perceive their health to be better, and expand skills and networks.

A warm welcome into community is foundational for successful integration, and local government and Ex-Service Organisations play a key role in offering support. The NSW Government also plays a part, for example through the Service NSW information page, which assists veterans to understand available services and concessions.

## Veterans say...

**Veterans say their identity is linked to a sense of purpose, and they want to continue to contribute to community after leaving service**

Veterans told us that a significant part of their identity was in the positive contribution they made to the community through service. Many were clear that they wanted to find ways to continue to contribute after leaving service. Some had found this purpose through volunteering; others hoped to find volunteering opportunities that would draw on their unique skills.

*"It's better for my mental health to be a volunteer with Legacy."*

*"Volunteering helps give a sense of worth and purpose; it's a way of staying connected with deployments, people, helps with mental health issues, helping in a civilian context."*

### Women veterans say that they find it hard to connect with others with similar experience

Women veterans told us that their experience within the military could be isolating, as there are still relatively low numbers of women in service, and that this sense of isolation could continue into their life as a veteran. They often found it difficult to find women with similar experiences in their communities, although that shared understanding would have helped their adjustment. They also told us that some existing supports were unwelcoming to women.

*“Our local centre is very male focused; it’s hard to find a network of women.”*

*“Sometimes you still get the ‘whose medals are they, love’ comment.”*

### Navigating the wide array of civilian activities can be a challenge, and a warm welcome by communities makes it easier to build connected lives

Life in the military is highly structured, with support for everyday activities. Veterans told us that when they moved into civilian life, the loss of structure and support meant they had to navigate the demands of everyday life alone. They were looking for support and many highlighted that finding others who had shared experiences, and reaching out immediately to the community, helped to build new supportive social structures.



### A culture of mutual support and connection

### What we know from research about community connections

#### For ex-service personnel, there are many ways to connect with community

Community connections play a critical role in the social health and wellbeing of veterans and their families. Different veterans, and veterans from different eras, seek out community support and engagement in different ways and through different organisations. In part, this relates to generational change and broader social trends around how people interact socially and with membership services. While mateship and connection between veterans is seen as a strong protective factor after leaving the ADF, the changing nature of military conflict and the individual needs of veterans can contribute to different social and community connection approaches.

Veterans’ organisations are critical to connecting veterans both with DVA supports and to other community and social activities. These organisations also provide assistance with transition, housing, homelessness, and income support for veterans and their families. Newer veterans’ organisations often focus on sport, volunteering, and broader social connections.

#### Sport and physical fitness are important for wellbeing and create social connection

International research shows that sport and physical activity enhances the subjective and psychological wellbeing of veterans, particularly for those who have experienced physical or psychological trauma<sup>11</sup>. In Australia, Milanese et al (2018)<sup>12</sup> found that

<sup>11</sup> Caddick N, Smith B 2014 The impact of sport and physical activity on the wellbeing of combat veterans: A systematic review *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 15(1):9-18  
<sup>12</sup> Milanese S, Crocker M, Ransom M and Sach E 2018 What are the physical and mental wellbeing benefits veterans achieve through participating in sporting activities? Summary report prepared for the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. International Centre for Allied Health Evidence



ADF AND VETERANS SAILING REGATTA, 9 OCTOBER 2020. COURTESY DEFENCE.GOV.AU



### Sport enhances wellbeing

sporting activity had a promising effect on mental wellbeing, particularly through structured competitive sport and aerobic exercise, supervised mind and body work and structured recreational physical activities. Veterans should feel encouraged to participate in sport as a means of promoting their wellbeing.

For ex-ADF members who have been impacted by injuries or mental health issues, isolation may become an additional concern. Sport and other fitness-based activities can offer a way to meet others and rebuild community connection.

#### Older veterans can have a different experience of ageing

The AIHW has examined the impact of ageing on former ADF members and found that their experience of ageing is affected by factors associated with service. For example, men aged 55-64 who had served had higher rates of mental and behavioural problems (1.8 times) and arthritis (1.6 times) than the non-serving population<sup>13</sup>. DVA offers support through funded health care and aged care services to assist with the health and care of older veterans. For older participants in a study of the health and service needs of older veterans<sup>14</sup>, maintaining independence and lifestyle was front of mind; and yet this focus on independence could also serve as a barrier for some who were reluctant to access services or call on family for support.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australia-at-a-glance/contents/diverse-groups-of-older-australians/veterans>  
<sup>14</sup> Feldman S, Dickens ML, Browning CJ, DeSoysa TS 2015 The health and service needs of older veterans: a qualitative analysis *Health Expect* 18(6):2202-2212



< MICHAEL FLYNN

## Volunteering: a pathway to meaning, contribution and wellbeing

Michael Flynn was a Navy Commodore, who served as a Medical Officer, in the Gulf War, in East Timor and in diplomatic postings, as well as being a qualified pilot. Now retired, Michael volunteers at the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park in Sydney.

Michael says that he feels that working at the Memorial is a special privilege, because it gives him a profound sense of the contribution to world peace that Australia has made, the ability to share the stories and commemorations with a diverse range of visitors, and the opportunity to educate and inform the next generation.

*"I learn something new every time I lead a tour of the Memorial."*

Veterans say that volunteering gives them a sense of contribution to the community and is important for their own wellbeing.



> PORT MACQUARIE VETERANS & FAMILY BOWLS DAY. COURTESY VSA

## Veterans and sport

Sport and physical activity are essential for wellbeing. The Office of Sport aims to increase participation in sport and recreation for all people in NSW, in particular for underrepresented groups.

An example of a successful program run by Veteran Sport Australia (VSA) to promote sport and activity for veterans and their families is their partnership with Bowls Australia to encourage veterans and their families to play lawn bowls.

Michael Hartung from VSA says: "Lawn bowls is a great activity – there's a range of ages playing lawn bowls now and it's an opportunity to connect younger veterans or people who have just left the service with older veterans".

*"Health and fitness are really important when you are in the service, and they are just as important when you leave the service. You have to make time for it. It's also a great way of staying in touch with other veterans."*

# Support

## Outcome

**Veterans with additional challenges receive the support and services they need.**

After leaving the ADF, most people transition into rewarding civilian lives where they continue to be valuable contributors to their communities. That transition may not always be straightforward; civilian life is different to military life in many ways, and as most people enter the military at a young age, the transition to civilian life as adults can be particularly difficult.

Providing the right support to veterans to navigate the transition successfully takes time and requires a flexible approach that reflects the diversity of veterans, their families, and their needs. Some veterans and their families also need support to deal with injuries or conditions that arise from their service, including challenges for mental, physical, and psychosocial health.

Navigating mainstream systems, including health and housing services, can be complex for veterans. While the NSW Government offers a wide range of services, including concessions and subsidies, it can be difficult for veterans and their families to identify the right services and understand which are tailored for the unique needs of veterans and their families.

Providing clarity about the supports available to veterans, ensuring easy access to services, and making sure supports are tailored to the needs of veterans will assist veterans to live fulfilling and active lives.

### Veterans say...

#### Concessions from the state and local government, for example for public transport, car registration, and rates, make a difference

Many veterans say that concessions make them feel that their service is valued and recognised. NSW is recognised as having generous concessions for veterans, but the eligibility for different concessions can be deemed confusing and sometimes the process of re-applying can be stressful.

*“I was so grateful when the State Government gave me the licence concession and then they backdated it.”*

*“Service NSW are fantastic; they are all over it and they can direct you.”*

#### Get help when you need it

Veterans told us of the dark times that they or former colleagues had passed through, including struggles with mental and physical health, housing and homelessness. They were looking both for practical solutions and for practitioners who understood their needs and were conscious that demand meant that sometimes there was a significant wait for services.

*“Counselling really helped.”*



CORRECTIVE SERVICES NSW AND DEFENCE COMMUNITY DOGS ARE DELIVERING ASSISTANCE DOG PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT VETERANS WITH PTSD AND OTHER MENTAL ILLNESS

### The whole family has needs relating to the veteran’s service – strong families offer better support to veterans themselves

Veterans and their families told us that the veteran’s service impacts the whole family, as multiple relocations can affect social lives and learning performance for children, as can living with a parent with mental illness. Families with two parents as veterans, have extra complexity. Veterans were clear that family support was critical to their wellbeing, and that the whole family needed support.

*“Family is part of the journey.”*

*“Transition is difficult for families too—they face the same challenges when they reconnect into new communities.”*

One area of focus was when veteran’s children relocated to new schools after discharge, a point where they really sought support.

*“It’s just starting that process from the beginning again, it’s another conversation, developing relationships.”*

Finally, partners and spouses also told us that they found it hard to navigate the demands of civilian life, particularly as most communication and support was aimed at the veterans themselves.

*“I’m educating my health providers—printing off material from DVA to give to them.”*

### What we know from research about support needs

#### Mainstream systems can be difficult to navigate

Veterans report that they experience significant barriers to accessing effective treatment for mental illness, including stigma around mental health, confusing entry points, and lack of holistic, multidisciplinary therapeutic treatments<sup>15</sup>.

Veterans also frequently report they do not understand how to access care, and that when they do access support, they sometimes receive contradictory advice. When veterans are receiving multiple supports, these can be poorly coordinated, with limited communication between providers<sup>16</sup>. This creates barriers to both initial access, ongoing engagement with treatment, and, critically, follow up.

### The demands of service are associated with significant health and wellbeing issues

It is estimated that at some stage in their lifetime, almost three in four veterans have experienced a mental disorder, including anxiety (46.1%), alcohol disorders (47.5%), and PTSD (24.9%)<sup>17</sup>. Suicide is a particular concern being 2.2 times more common for ex-serving men than all Australian men under 30<sup>18</sup>. While women experience lower rates of suicide than ex-serving men, suicide is still 2.15 times more common for ex-serving women<sup>19</sup> than non-serving women. DVA provides services to assist with these issues and funds veteran-specific services such as Open Arms.

The NSW Government is funding a new pilot program called the 'COPE Program' which will support veterans and emergency service workers living with PTSD and Substance Use Disorders outside of hospital and acute medical settings at The Buttery in Northern NSW. The Buttery has extensive experience delivering trauma-informed ancillary treatments in a therapeutic community setting which assists in providing structure in daily living; support through physical and psychological safety; individual acceptance and encouragement; and support of healthy values.

Since 2011, the NSW Government has provided over \$3.5 million to support research and interventions focused on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In 2017, NSW Government announced an additional \$191 million for the Concord Repatriation Hospital redevelopment taking the total investment in the Concord redevelopment to \$341 million. In addition, the NSW Government has invested \$87 million over three years in new suicide prevention initiatives that contribute to the Premier's Priority to reduce the suicide rate by 20% by 2023. These include best practice crisis care and support, building on local community resilience and improving systems and practices to reduce the suicide rate in NSW. The NSW Government also works with the Commonwealth to better understand the issue of veteran suicide and is actively contributing to the work of the National Commission for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention. NSW was the first state to call on the Commonwealth for more to be done to prevent veteran suicide and continues to advocate for collaboration to save lives.

### Some veterans face challenges with homelessness

Some veterans are at an increased risk of homelessness, at the point of transition from the ADF and afterwards due to ongoing vulnerabilities. Recent research has shown that the strongest risk factors for veteran homelessness are psychological distress during service, relationship breakdown, and unemployment following transition<sup>20</sup>. This research reviewed DVA and Defence data and found an estimated 5,767 (or 5.3%) veterans who recently left the ADF met the ABS definition of experiencing homelessness over a 12-month period.

Multiple factors typically contributed to their homelessness. Most common factors were: mental health issues, substance use, relationship breakdown, and family estrangement<sup>21</sup>.

Veterans who are sleeping rough are assessed as having higher needs for short-term and intensive supports. 50% were assessed as needing long-term housing and intensive supports, possibly for the duration of their lives<sup>22</sup>.

### Innovative approaches such as assistance dog programs can help

A diverse range of other current models provide care for veterans, spanning wellbeing to PTSD. One model is assistance dog programs that support veterans with PTSD and



COURTESY NCVH

## National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare

Australia's first integrated healthcare service caring for veterans' physical and mental health.

Kelly\* served with the Army for over 20 years and was medically discharged from her last role in Victoria. She chose to return to western NSW to be close to her family, and then found it very hard to get the medical treatment she needed, particularly mental health support and access to specialists.

Since contacting the NCVH, Kelly has received coordinated care, with access to relevant specialists. Some of her treatment has been managed remotely and the Centre has worked with her GP to ensure that her regular care meets her needs and to help her liaise with DVA. This is the aim of NCVH: to provide an integrated ambulatory care service to assess, treat and support the health and wellbeing of Australian veterans.

The NCVH, located at Concord Repatriation General Hospital, provides multidisciplinary clinical assessment and management across Rehabilitation, Pain Management, Psychiatry, Drug Health, Clinical Psychology and a comprehensive Allied Health team. Case Managers support veterans throughout their treatment journey at

NCVH and facilitate links between the service's clinicians, the veteran's GP and other community providers, to sustain ongoing coordinated care in their local area.

The NVCH is a public health service, accessible to any ex-serving member of the Australian Defence Force. Since commencement of a pilot service in August 2019, the NCVH has received over 130 referrals for veterans from all ADF branches, with complex physical and mental health conditions and psychosocial needs. The NCVH has consistently received positive feedback from clients, families and referrers. A prospective cohort study is underway to further evaluate the pilot period of the service, incorporating considerations of client, family/carer and referrer satisfaction, veteran-rated quality of life, labour force participation and health service utilisation.

\*Name changed for privacy

*"The NCVH has been a Godsend for me."*

other mental illness such as depression and anxiety. While there is still limited empirical evidence supporting this approach, small studies suggest that adding trained service dogs to care may result in clinically meaningful improvements in PTSD<sup>23</sup>. There are many organisations that provide assistance dogs for veterans in NSW. These include the NSW Government partnership between Corrective Services NSW and Defence Community Dogs.

15 National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare Advice February 2020

16 National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare Advice February 2020

17 Mental Health Prevalence, Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study, the Department of Defence and DVA

18 National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare Prospectus, Sydney Local Health District

19 National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: 2019, AIHW

20 Hilferty, F., Katz, I., Van Hooff, M., Lawrence-Wood, E., Zmudzki, F., Searle, A., Evans, G., 2019, Homelessness amongst Australian veterans: Final report of the AHURI inquiry. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI).

21 Ibid  
22 Inner City Sydney Registry Week 2015 Report, 2016, Homelessness NSW.

23 O'Haire ME and Rodriguez KE 2018 Preliminary efficacy of service dogs as a complementary treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder in military members and veterans J Consult Clin Psychol 86(2):179-188



# More information

## Governance of the Strategy

This is a whole of government commitment, and the agencies which are responsible for individual commitments are identified in the Action Plan. Each agency is responsible for the implementation of its initiatives. Where actions are joint or involve partnerships between more than one organisation, there is a 'lead' agency for each of these activities.

This will be a live document that responds to changes and emerging needs. The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented change in the design and delivery of services and in how we communicate with our stakeholders. The way we respond to these issues will continue to evolve over time as we adapt to changing circumstances.

## Reporting

We will prepare progress reports against the Strategy. The Office for Veterans Affairs will coordinate the preparation of the reports and will liaise with lead agencies to collate updates.

The Office for Veterans Affairs will also maintain regular contact with lead agencies through the year to monitor progress and identify any issues in implementation or delivery.

## Continuing consultation

The Strategy includes a commitment to regular consultation with key stakeholders, including veterans and their families and representatives from ex-service organisations.

## NSW Government

Information about concessions and supports

[www.service.nsw.gov.au/guide/veterans](http://www.service.nsw.gov.au/guide/veterans)

Veterans Employment Program

[www.vep.veterans.nsw.gov.au](http://www.vep.veterans.nsw.gov.au)

Office for Veterans Affairs

[www.veterans.nsw.gov.au](http://www.veterans.nsw.gov.au)

Veterans Advocacy Service

[www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/what-we-do/civil-law/veterans-advocacy](http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/what-we-do/civil-law/veterans-advocacy)

Ranks to Recognition program

[www.tafensw.edu.au/study/pathways/ranks-to-recognition](http://www.tafensw.edu.au/study/pathways/ranks-to-recognition)

Anzac Memorial

[www.anzacmemorial.nsw.gov.au](http://www.anzacmemorial.nsw.gov.au)

Volunteering portal

[www.volunteering.nsw.gov.au/volunteer-now](http://www.volunteering.nsw.gov.au/volunteer-now)

Link2Home Veterans and Ex Service

1800 326 989

National Centre for Veterans' Healthcare

[www.slhd.nsw.gov.au/concord/hcvh](http://www.slhd.nsw.gov.au/concord/hcvh)

## Australian Government

Department of Veterans Affairs

[www.dva.gov.au](http://www.dva.gov.au)

Defence Community Organisation

[www.defence.gov.au/dco](http://www.defence.gov.au/dco)



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## Endorsements

### RSL NSW State President – Ray James OAM



As one of the largest Ex-Service member-based organisations, RSL NSW is pleased to support the Government's first NSW Veterans Strategy. The RSL participated in its development by promoting the NSW Veterans Survey and Forums to our membership across NSW. RSL NSW is working closely with the NSW Government to ensure all veterans are honoured and supported in their civilian life, and the veterans' strategy will be a genuine contribution to achieving this goal.

### Legacy NSW, Sydney Legacy President – Nikki Hollis



Sydney Legacy was established in 1926 and, nearly a century later, continues to support the families of those who have given their life or health for their country. It is therefore timely for the NSW Government to be developing its first NSW Veterans Strategy to raise the profile of the contributions that veterans, and especially their families, make to our country. The Strategy and Action Plan are important documents profiling the work done in NSW to support veterans, their families and the broader community. Sydney Legacy is pleased to endorse this work.

### Australian War Widows NSW, National and State President – Rhondda Vanzella OAM



The War Widows Guild was established for women, by women to promote and protect the interests of war widows, with currently 23,000 aged between 34 and 106 in NSW. We extend our congratulations to the NSW Government on its proactive approach to listening to the voices of veterans and their families. We are pleased our members actively contributed to the NSW Veterans Survey and Forums and know that this feedback is being taken on board to ensure veterans and their families are well supported in NSW.



ABORIGINAL AND  
TORRES STRAIT  
ISLANDER VETERANS  
COMMEMORATION  
SERVICE. PHOTO BY  
KERRIN LOVELL

