

DFWA NATIONAL PRESIDENT – SENATE INQUIRY INTO DEFENCE SUICIDES

David Jamison, DFWA National President, was appeared before the Senate Committee inquiring into Veterans suicides on 18 November 2016. Noel Mc Laughlin, Chairman of the RAACC, accompanied him and they jointly answered the Committees questions.

The below article by Max Blenkin appeared on AAP news shortly after, reporting on what David said.

By Max Blenkin, Defence Correspondent 18 November 2016

CANBERRA, Nov 18 AAP - Australia's defence personnel are among the nation's finest, trained to be resilient and lauded by political leaders and the community yet too many are taking their own lives.

"That begs the question - why are we getting it so wrong?" asked Alliance of Defence Service Organisations spokesman retired Colonel David Jamison.

He told a Senate committee investigating suicide by veterans and former defence personnel that the issue wasn't just the numbers who had attempted or taken this final step. "It's also that these tragic incidents have occurred within a cohort of men and women who are amongst the nation's finest and who have been trained and conditioned to be resilient," he said.

The committee has received more than 300 submissions, many from ex-service personnel describing their unhappy dealings with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mr Jamison said DVA was seeking to improve its performance and culture but, historically, many found the process of lodging a claim to be adversarial, complex and protracted. "The clear impression amongst the more vulnerable veterans is that the establishment is against them," he said.

John Bale, chief executive of the ex-services welfare group Soldier On, said dealing with DVA could be stressful and should be improved but the real issue was the transition from defence to civilian life. "When they get out, they don't really understand the world they are getting into," he told the committee.

"You are not trained to do that inside the military and anyone that still wears a uniform can't truly tell you how it is on the outside because they haven't experienced it."

Mr Bale said the key to the transition process was ensuring family and social networks remained strong and there were jobs available.

This week the government moved to help on the jobs front, with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull launching a program to promote employment of ex-service personnel. He urged businesses to consider the unique skills and experience of those who had served in the defence force.

Just how many ex-service personnel commit suicide isn't known, though it's thought to be high. A media report this year indicated 41 ex-service personnel took their own lives in 2016 - the same number of Australian personnel killed in a decade in Afghanistan.

Defence says 118 serving personnel died by suicide between 2000 and September 2016, a rate lower than for the general population. Of those, 60 were Army, 37 Navy and 21 RAAF. All but eight were male while more than half (64) had never deployed to any of the recent missions such as East Timor, Iraq or Afghanistan.

In its submission to the committee, DVA said care should be taken in attributing some deaths as suicide without a coroner's finding. That includes drug overdoses, single vehicle car accidents, falls or drowning, which could be accidental or intentional. DVA has commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to research the issue and its findings are due by the end of the year.

Readers seeking support and information about suicide prevention can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.