

# Legislation Reform

Advocacy Paper - August 2024



FAMILIES  
OF VETERANS GUILD  
CONNECT - SUPPORT - EMPOWER



**581,000** Veterans in Australia

**450,000 +** Families of Veterans in Australia

**30%** of families experience psychological distress (2018 Families Wellbeing Study)

**37%** of families experience financial hardship (2018 Families Wellbeing Study)

**60%** of families experience negative career impacts (2018 Families Wellbeing Study)

**24%** of children experience psychological distress (2018 Families Wellbeing Study)

## The Problem

The Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment and Support (Simplification and Harmonisation) Bill 2024 (the Bill) is a necessary first step to making for a more equitable veteran support system but it does not change the model of care offered to veteran families, it still uses the 100-year-old model which presumes families do not need help and support until a veteran passes away.

The increased demands on Australian veterans and their families together with the long shadow of subsequent conflicts as seen the needs of families grow. The model of waiting until crisis or a veteran passes away before supporting families isn't sufficient anymore. The truth is families need support much earlier.

While changing the model of care for families of veterans is a much larger and different body of work the foundations of this work could be laid in this Bill. Amendments to the Bill can improve conditions for the families of veterans, alleviate some of the burdens that service in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) places on them, and set the conditions for future work to bring families of veterans into the support system before a veteran passes away.

## Amendments that can help

- Include the words 'veteran families' and to remove archaic language which perpetuates power dynamics and isn't consistent with contemporary standards. Language like 'wholly dependent partner', 'dependents' and 'attendants' no longer meets community expectations and devalues the role of veteran families.
- Define 'veteran families' by using the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of family.
- Extend presumptive liability provisions to include deaths in service as a result of disease.
- Amending gold card provisions for children of deceased veterans removing age limits, or adding a white card arrangement for these children to cover their mental health treatment for life.
- Remove prescribed limits and lists of services within ss213-220 and ss268A -268B of the MRCA.

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## Amendments Continued

- Remove the 2 year time limit in s268B of the MRCA for widows/ bereaved families.
- Expanding the remit of the MRCC ('the Commission') to include veteran family needs and considerations.
- Include the capacity for the Commission to consider submissions from the veteran community sector and advocacy bodies regarding the operation of the MRCA, claims consideration and policy development.
- Replicate the appointment provisions for the Repatriation Commissioner for the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner position, ensuring that veteran family groups get to have a say in the appointment of their representative.

## Why Families Deserve Support

Families are impacted by the service and sacrifices of their loved ones. Families' lives are impacted by the unique nature of military service, and they too sacrifice freedoms and choices in service of Australia and her interests without signing the contract of service.

Studies on Family wellbeing from 2018 indicate not all families are well and there are support needs. Some of those findings are highlighted above. Further, research on the wellbeing of families whose veteran had war service in Vietnam indicate:

- It can take decades for the effects of war service to manifest for veterans and their families.
- As many as 1 in 3 spouses of war veterans could be diagnosed with depression
- As many as 4 in 10 spouses may experience suicidal ideation
- The presence of PTSD within a relationship will likely have negative consequences on the mental health outcomes of families.
- Children of veterans with PTSD and war service were likely to experience mental health challenges.

These findings apply to families of veterans who have been deployed to war. With more than 40,000 Australians deployed to the Middle East Area of operations over the 20 years to 2021- these findings are relevant to multiple generations of Australian families. The families of our veterans are impacted by military service in Australia, and it is our collective responsibility to support all of those who suffer for our freedoms.

*"...the family's bear the ultimate burden and sacrifice."*

*Veteran, 31-50 yrs NSW*