



FAMILIES OF VETERANS GUILD

CONNECT - SUPPORT - EMPOWER

**SUBMISSION: RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON
DEFENCE AND VETERAN FAMILY WELLBEING STRATEGY
2025-2030**

*“A stronger more sustainable and resilient defence and veteran
community cannot be achieved without supporting and empowering the
families of veterans.”*

CEO, Families of Veterans Guild



DEFENCE AND VETERAN FAMILY WELLBEING STRATEGY – SUBMISSION OF THE FAMILIES OF VETERANS GUILD

The Families of Veterans Guild (**‘the Guild’**) proudly owned and operated by Australian War Widows NSW Ltd, is grateful for the opportunity to contribute on the consultation of the Defence and Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy 2025-2023 (**‘the Strategy’**). The Guild represents and supports the families of all our veterans because we understand the unique sacrifices veteran families make, and the impacts of those sacrifices. We understand because we are families of veterans and have represented them since World War One.

Our vision is to see all families of veterans thriving, resilient, acknowledged and respected because they are crucial for a strong and robust Australian Defence Force (**‘ADF’**). As the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide noted *“One person joins, the whole family serves.”*¹

We know that defending Australia has consequences that impact more than just the veteran. We know that the stability families provide to veterans comes at a cost which can erode family resilience and affect their health and wellbeing.² A summary of the Guilds background, programs and services is at *Attachment A*.

The *Strategy* is a welcomed step for the families of Australia’s veterans. The Guild in particular welcomes the Minister’s acknowledgement and commitment to the families of current and former serving ADF members. The Guild is particularly encouraged to see the Minister’s acknowledgement of the sacrifices and challenges faced by Defence and veteran families and the government’s commitment to supporting them.

The Guild encourages the Minister and the Australian Government to be bolder in what it proposes to do to offset the challenges and provide practical support to families of current and former serving ADF members.

Feedback on the Strategy

The *Strategy* outlines a detailed commitment to listening and learning more. While an admirable and ongoing need, a lot is already known, and compared to how other nations support the families of their service members, Australia is well behind in how we support the families of current and former serving ADF members (**‘families’**).

The model of care for families is more than 100 years old and contains some core assumptions which are no longer correct, are outdated and need to be changed. The model of care for families was created following the World Wars and assumes that families do not need support nor services until a veteran passes away in or because of their service.

We know that is simply not true.

¹ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide: Final Report (2024) Vol 6 at 27.4 p 14.

² Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide: Final Report (2024) Vol 6; para 344, p 64.



We know this because families have been telling us this for decades, they have been telling Government departments, Ministers, Royal Commissions, researchers and the media that this simply isn't true.

While the Guild concurs with high level sentiments within the Strategy, much more needs to be done and could be done now, not in 2030.

The *Strategy* points to the importance of supporting the lifetime wellbeing of families in all their forms, the Guild couldn't agree more. However, it is not clear from the *Strategy* how that this would practically be achieved. The *Strategy* contains a lot of broad and non-committal statements regarding what will be done and how. This conflicts with the Minister's strong commitment at the start of the document. The *Strategy* highlights the important role of families and their contribution, and it is easy to feel hopeful that this *Strategy* will change the model of care for families. However, this sentiment isn't sustained through to the substance of the document.

For example, the principles that guide the *Strategy* speak of providing information to families, but not services. It speaks about being aware of emerging family needs but not addressing them. It speaks about recognising the diversity within this group but not saying how. It speaks of helping families make informed decisions but not offsetting the burdens placed on them. These principles maintain the status quo for veteran families and fall short in meeting the current and developing needs of veteran families.

The *Strategy* does not factor the entire system of care available to families. It assumes that the only support available to families is through Defence and the Department of Veterans Affairs; an assumption which again doesn't show families the full picture, nor provide a structure for how the Government will bring work with the entire defence and veteran community to ensure families are supported. The *Strategy* ought to be taking a strategic view of the current state and outlining its vision for the future. Leaving community sector support out of this picture unnecessarily fractures the sector and creates gaps for families to continue to fall through. As a statement of Government Policy, the *Strategy* needs to be holistic.

The *Strategy* assumes that the barriers to family involvement in the system of veteran care is their invisibility within the system and their lack of engagement. But this assumption does not hold true when looking at the barriers to accessing the system of veteran care and family involvement. Chief among these barriers are the cultural perceptions of families which continue to undermine their visibility and involvement including:

- Continuing to refer to them and conceptualise them as dependant on the ADF member/ veteran.
- Failing to recognise them as individuals in their own right with their own needs, who give up freedoms and choices that other Australians get to enjoy.
- Systemically disempowering them through the channelling of communications, support and entitlements through the ADF member and veteran only.
- Rising unmet and under met mental health needs among families; and
- An imbalanced power dynamic for civilian families that keeps them from participating, and recognising their own needs.



Families have real unique needs because they have sacrificed choices and freedoms other Australians get to enjoy. Freedoms that are protected because a member of their family volunteered to do whatever it takes to keep Australia safe. Many of these needs are already known and there is a lot more that can be done. A summary of what is already known is at *Attachment B*.

There is already enough information to make real, substantive and practical steps forward for families, before 2030.

From our own work over the last 4 years, and in talking to families on the ground, the Guild has found the following issues within the current system which could be quickly resolved by Government:

1. The ceasing of health care support for children of deceased veterans.
2. A lack of meaningful mental health support available to meet the needs of the families.
3. A lack of meaningful childcare support that offsets additional care burdens caused by military service, injury, illness or death; and
4. A strong rejection of notions of dependency and a want for respectful recognition.

The Guild would like to see the Government take the following key actions to address these issues through this *Strategy*:

1. Provide lifetime mental health treatment for the children of deceased veterans.
2. Extend the veteran's white card for mental health treatment to include partners, parents and children of veterans
3. Provide access to in-home care support for families with young children; and
4. Remove of dependency-based language from legislative frameworks and policies.

Action in the areas of access to mental health treatment and support is urgently required. Current support available to families doesn't address these needs in a meaningful and simple way. The support available is full of red tape, technical and rigid rules that result in the broader need not being met. In particular, the restriction of counselling services available to and through Open Arms requires Government to look at alternatives what is available fails to meet current and emerging needs of families.

Family support must start before 2030

As both the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and multiple Senate Estimate Hearings have demonstrated, and the Government already knows; Defence is struggling to recruit and retain personnel. Together with the Royal Commission, the Guild submits that supporting families of current and former serving members better is a key strategy to help Defence recruit and retain personnel.³

This important aspect is not necessarily being adequately considered or pursued but will be critical to recruitment and retention success. While strategically, the rhetoric is correct, at the ground level it isn't translating into meaningful change. As acknowledged by the Minister, a key reason a veteran has chosen to leave the ADF is because of the impacts of their service on their

³ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide: Final Report (2024) Vol 6; 27.3 para 62 p14.



family.⁴ Further to this, we know families are becoming increasingly affected by the sacrifices they make in the defence of Australia. A 2022 survey of Defence Partners noted that their life satisfaction was lower than the general population.⁵

The Royal Commission also highlighted the link between family support, recruitment, retention and Australia's military capability.⁶ In her evidence before the Royal Commission, Lieutenant General Natasha Fox, Chief of Personnel, acknowledged that families enabled military service.⁷

The Royal Commission went on to find that:

- Family support underpins Defence capability.
- It is critical to the wellbeing of serving and ex-serving members. It can protect against the risk of suicide and suicidality.
- Families enable help and support seeking behaviour and recovery when a veteran is ill or injured.
- Families help keep veterans safe and provide emotional practical, administrative and financial support.
- Families are an important point of connection between the veteran and their health and mental health professionals; and
- Families provide hope promote social connection and support a sense of personal agency.⁸

The Royal Commission also noted that the effect of service on families continues beyond the members transition from Defence.⁹

Through this *Strategy* the Government can assure families and prospective veterans alike that Australia will have their back. It can assure families that they don't remain invisible and won't have to continue to build business cases as to why they need access to services for another five years. The Government can commit to using what is already known to make real, substantial and practical changes for families.

As the Prime Minister noted in December 2024:

*"'Lest we forget' is Australia's most solemn promise. A promise to remember the fallen, to honour their sacrifice **and to care for their loved ones left behind.**"¹⁰*

To truly honour the legacy of our veterans and the sacrifices of their families we must improve all areas of our system of care and for families. The Guild asks the Government to take those steps today, strengthen this *Strategy*, revisit its underlying assumptions, and start making substantive change for families in 2025, not in five years' time.

⁴ Ibid 27.3 para 39 p 10.

⁵ Ibid 27.4 para 67 p 27.

⁶ Ibid 27.3 paras 36-40 p10; 27.4 paras 67-71 p15.

⁷ Ibid 27.8 para 342 p 63.

⁸ Ibid 27.8 para 343 p 63.

⁹ Ibid 27.8 para 347 p 64.

¹⁰ Albanese - Press Conference Transcript 2.12.2024



As a community, together with Government, we must provide Australians and their families with the confidence to sign up and serve; to know that their service and sacrifice are valued; and to believe that Australia will forever have their backs.

It is the veteran and their family that defends Australia. It is now time that supporting families becomes more than rhetoric. Families are asking Government to step up and facilitate the change that is so desperately needed. For our part, we at the Guild are willing and ready to work with Government to achieve this.

“Families are critical to the retention and operational effectiveness of the ADF the government recognises and values the pivotal role of defence families in supporting the health and wellbeing of defence people the government is committed to supporting ADF members and their families...”

National Defence Strategy, 17.04.2024



ATTACHMENT A

About the Families of Veterans Guild

The Families of Veterans Guild empowers the health and wellbeing of the families of veterans.

From the moment a veteran commences their service in the Navy, Army or Air Force and for the rest of their lives, the Guild is open to the families of veterans.

Supporting the health and wellbeing of families throughout their entire journey with a veteran and beyond is critical because:

- Families of veterans enable the Defence of Australia.
- Families of veterans are impacted by the unique nature of Australian Defence Service. These impacts create health and wellbeing challenges for families.
- Families of combat veterans in particular face mental health challenges themselves; and
- Families of veterans who are wounded, injured, ill or who have died in or, as a result of defending Australia, suffer silently in a system that barely recognises or supports them.



Since the late 1940s the Guild has been delivering social support, bereavement support, education and skill building, advocacy and social connection to the families of veterans. From the war widows of World War One right through to modern conflicts, the Guild has impacted thousands of lives of everyday Australians who have made the quiet and unseen sacrifice for Australia's peace, security and freedom.

As the only organisation in Australia to unite all war widows and veteran families under one banner, our priority is the social and emotional wellbeing of those that enable the defence of Australia. We are currently providing support to 2,300 families of veterans predominantly located in NSW and the ACT.

Through our work we:

- Reduce social isolation and loneliness
- Reduce the impacts of physical and mental illness or injury
- Increase individual and family resilience
- Contribute to preventing veteran suicide
- Provide families with access to government and community support services
- Support the empowerment of women; and
- Build individual capacity & self-efficacy through skill building and education.

The Guild's programs and services have one inclusive target group – the families of veterans. From the first day of service to beyond the life of the veteran, the Guild is here to support the health and wellbeing of the veteran's family.



Since 2021, the Guild has modernised its model of care for veteran families – leading the way (as it did post-World War Two) by removing all barriers to its services, support and organisation – and it has transformed itself into Australia’s only organisation that is there for all families, all of the time.

Health and Wellbeing of Veteran Families



The Department of Defence and Veterans Affairs have together agreed the key factors underpinning the health and wellbeing of the veteran community (or domains of wellbeing) as depicted in this model. It is through working within these areas that, together with Government and other organisations, the Guild is able to support veterans and empower and enable their families to live well throughout their loved one’s service journey and beyond. The work of the Guild is aligned to these domains through direct service delivery to families and by advocating for them individually and at a broader community level.

Working within these domains, the Guild’s focus is on addressing the needs of the veteran’s family, not the veteran. Together with Government and other organisations addressing the needs of veteran and children under 18, the Guild fills a critical gap in the veteran system and ensures no one in need is left behind.

Areas of direct service delivery

- Health
- Social Support & Connection
- Education & Skills
- Meaning & Spirituality
- Recognition & Respect

Areas of advocacy

- Health
- Recognition & Respect
- Justice & Safety
- Income & Finance
- Home & Housing
- Employment & Meaningful Activity

The Guild is unique in its scope and services. It is currently the only organisation in Australia that exists to support all families of veterans when they need it. It can and does support the families of current serving members, bereaved families, families of injured and ill veterans.

Its programs, services and business have been carefully crafted and developed to ensure that:

- It does not make a distinction between families of current or former serving ADF members, nor does the service standard or access discriminate based on what has/ has not happened to the veteran.
- It prioritises families and family members of veterans.
- It integrates Defence, veteran and civilian care systems and opportunities.



- It ensures its social work and wellbeing services are delivered and overseen by skilled employees.
- It is person-centric, and trauma informed in its design, implementation and delivery. It provides service navigation and care coordination outside of its own organisation.

Social Impact

The Guild has mapped its work against the major social issues it is striving to influence. These issues are:

- Reducing social isolation and loneliness
- Reducing impacts of physical or mental illness and injury
- Increasing individual resilience
- Preventing suicide
- Accessing Government and associated services
- Empowering women
- Building individual capacity & self-efficacy through skill building and education.



ATTACHMENT B

Key research

There are 581,139 veterans in Australia. 15% are currently serving and 85% are former serving.¹¹

1 in 5 households in Australia contains a veteran. With 9.2 million households in Australian containing on average 2.5 people/ household¹² we can estimate that there are more than 700,000 people living with a veteran in Australia.

26 million Australians enjoy living in a peaceful, stable and secure democracy because 581,000¹³ of their fellow Australians have chosen to serve in their place. Up to 700,000¹⁴ everyday Australian families live with the flow-on effects of that service, many themselves impacted through the demands of Defence life or experience on them, the health and wellbeing impacts of that life upon their veteran, the impacts of war and conflict and, ultimately, the impacts of grief and loss.

Together, at least 1.2 million Australians have their liberties curtailed so that the 24.8 million others can live in peace, neither directly impacted by nor needing to worry about the horrors and distress across our world.

There are 1090 charities in Australia who solely support the veteran and family community. Of this, only 12 organisations solely support families.¹⁵ Of this, the Families of Veterans Guild is the only charity who does not have eligibility criteria and seeks to support all those families who need it, when they need it most.

Research into the *health and wellbeing of the families of Australian Vietnam War* veterans indicates that as many as one in three spouses of war veterans could be diagnosed with depression, and as many as four in ten spouses may experience suicidal ideation.¹⁶ It also found that Children of veterans with PTSD and war service were likely to experience mental health challenges.¹⁷ This study also found that:

- The mental wellbeing of spouses of war veterans is likely to be poorer than the mental health of spouses whose veteran has no war-like service or who is not a veteran.
- 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.¹⁸

¹¹ 2021 Census

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics; Census (2021)

¹⁴ Ibid. Calculation of numbers of families is an estimate based on the number of households in Australia containing a veterans and number of people per household in Australia.

¹⁵ ACNC Charities Register, accessed October 2024

¹⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs (2021) Vietnam Veterans Families Study; <https://www.dva.gov.au/documents-and-publications/vietnam-veterans-family-study>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.



In 2009 research on Military Deployment and its impact on children noted the responsibility of care and support is often placed completely on the parent who remains at home or other family members during deployment. However, as it is hard for one parent or caregiver to provide this on their own, many children are likely to be deprived of the nurture and support that they need to develop at a healthy rate.¹⁹ In addition, the military context means that a child must deal with realistic fears about their parent's welfare and safety while deployed. While all children react to this experience differently, reactions often entail severe emotional distress, behavioural problems, social isolation or emotional detachment. The study found that rates of child neglect and maltreatment were nearly twice as high during periods of deployment, due to the extra responsibility placed on the parent at home and the absence of a parental figure. Macfarlane acknowledges that this research has its limitations as it focuses on nuclear families and doesn't consider female veterans, divorced families, single-parent service members or dual-career families.²⁰

A 2016 study commissioned by the Department of Defence into *the Role of Family in the Australian Defence Force Member's Rehabilitation* noted that, while family support was a key influence on the wellbeing of a seriously injured or ill veterans, providing that support can be a source of strain on family members.²¹ This study also found these family members are often undertaking a greater share of domestic labour or childcare. It found that these family members put their careers on hold to care for veterans physically or emotionally, including managing the veteran's mood and the veteran's environment.²² As a result, family members (carers) can become socially isolated due to the mental and emotional pressure of their role.²³

A study conducted in 2018, the *Family Wellbeing Study*, found that military service can be a source of stress that may impact the mental health of members and their families.²⁴ It also found that 59% of families of veterans including spouses, parents and children are psychologically distressed. That 23% of families including spouses and children had reported high levels of PTSD and 41% of families including spouses, parents and adult children had suicidal ideation. Additionally, this study showed that 37% of families had experienced financial hardship. 60% of partners indicated that their employment and careers had been negatively impacted by their family members' military service.

A 2019 study which explored the Mental Health of Military-Connected Children found that children in military families are faced by a unique combination of persistent stressors that set them apart from civilian families, and when these stressors are left unaddressed, their risk of

¹⁹ McFarlane, A. C. (2009). Military deployment: the impact on children and family adjustment and the need for care. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 22(4), 369–373. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ycp.0b013e32832c9064>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Muir et al (2016): Australian Institute of Family Studies: *The Role of Family in the Australian Defence Force Member's Rehabilitation* <https://aifs.gov.au/research/commissioned-reports/role-family-australian-defence-force-members-rehabilitation>

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Smart et al (2018): Australian Institute of Family Studies: *Family Wellbeing Study* <https://aifs.gov.au/research/commissioned-reports/family-wellbeing-study>



developing a range of mental health problems is much higher. These stressors include relocation with little choice of location or duration, frequent family separation due to deployment and heightened awareness of the higher risks of injury or death associated with military service.²⁵

A 2018 study into the intergenerational consequences of war: anxiety, depression, suicidality, and mental health among the children of war veterans found that young children of deployed parents experience more anxiety, depression and psychological distress. This was found as a result of both the significant psychological harms experienced by the deployed parents that impact their parenting abilities, and the effects of child-parent separation during crucial periods of development for the child. Further, this study found that children of deployed veterans were also more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and to action these thoughts than the children of non-deployed veterans. The differences in mental distress and suicidality of children from both deployed and non-deployed veteran families shows that there are lifelong adverse effects of parental deployment and child-parent separation.²⁶

These findings highlight the unique challenges faced by defence and veteran families, without even looking at more complicated experiences.

Living experiences

At the Guild, we are made up of the families of veterans. The organisation has strong feedback loops which provide it with the means to capture insights from those with lived experience. Through this means, the Guild has families and caregivers of veterans who require:

- Practical information about the system and support available to them.
- A support network of their peers.
- Help in managing the responsibilities placed on them by government in the enabling of Defence service, helping veterans' transition back into civilian life and the ongoing responsibility for the wellbeing of their loved ones.
- Help in managing burnout.
- Recognition of their role.
- Inclusion in the system of support available to veterans to offset the negative impacts of service on them.

Great demands on families of veterans

The Government places great demands on the families of our veterans but offers little by way of support to compensate for these demands and curtailment of liberties that everyday Australians enjoy. While veterans are serving, their families are required to:

- Move around the country at the whim of Defence's priorities.

²⁵ Cramm, H., McColl, M. A., Aiken, A. B., & Williams, A. (2019). The Mental Health of Military-Connected Children: A Scoping Review. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(7), 1725–1735. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01402-y>

²⁶ Forrest, W., Edwards, B., & Daraganova, G. (2018). The intergenerational consequences of war: anxiety, depression, suicidality, and mental health among the children of war veterans. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 47(4), 1060–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyy040>



- Face long periods of separation, even when living in the 'posted location'. Defence members are on duty 24/7 and are often sent away on exercises or activities.
- Face the ongoing risk that their loved ones may not come home at all.
- Raise children on their own and live a 'normal life'.
- Persistently change jobs (if they can work) and take time off to meet the needs of the family as the member's ability to do this is exceptionally limited.

The above expectations create the following challenges for families of current serving members:

- Career and income earning limitations
- Access to services like health care and childcare
- Additional domestic and care responsibilities
- Erosion of mental health and wellbeing
- Erosion of social connections

These challenges move with families, even after a veteran leaves the Defence Force, and they are exacerbated significantly when something goes wrong, i.e. there is an injury/ illness or death of a veteran.

Impacts of the unpredictability of a 'Defence life'

Additionally, the unpredictability of defence and veteran family life has been shown to have negative impacts on psychological wellbeing. Research cited by the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide noted that there is a strong correlation between having a sense of control over one's life and psychological wellbeing. The unpredictability also has negative impacts on:

- partner's employment
- partner's ability to build a career
- children's education
- childcare;
- social support networks.