



AUSTRALIAN
WAR WIDOWS NSW LTD

Advocacy Plan

April 2023-March 2024

INTRODUCTION

The veteran support sector is evolving. It is moving beyond supporting and advocating only for those who have worn a uniform or have a Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) entitlement. The system has recognised the critical role that families play in supporting Australian Defence Force (ADF) veterans and many organisations are now extending their remit and services to include support for families.

With the number of complex policy challenges growing rapidly the need to not only understand but raise awareness of how the unique nature of military service impacts families has never been greater. If there is one significant lesson from the Afghanistan War, it was this – the veteran support eco-system was not ready to meet the needs of that generation of veterans and their families. The system is rapidly trying to catch up and make the adjustments necessary to better support this contemporary generation and a lot of work and investment is required across the sector in order to modernise services, systems and supports. At a time where the system is in 'catch up mode' the ADF is busily preparing for continued unrest in our immediate region. Rapid expansions in ADF capability are expected over the next few years, coupled with a doubling of the size of the ADF – the timing of veteran reform initiatives has never been more critical. The role that veterans' families play has never been more important.

Evidence collected and discussed at the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran suicide has confirmed what AWWNSW has known for some time:

- Veterans' families need to be seen and heard by the support system
- Families of veterans must be recognised and support in their own right
- Veterans' families bare the burdens of ADF service; and
- The mental health needs of veteran's families must be addressed.

It is within this context that AWWNSW advocates for the inclusion of veterans' families in a reformed veteran support eco-system. Because supporting veteran's families affects the wellbeing of millions of Australians and is vital to our nations defence, peace and security.

AWWNSW ADVOCACY EXPERIENCE

Advocacy has been a core element of AWWNSW's service delivery for 77 years. AWWNSW has advocated on matters affecting war widows and veterans' families at all levels of government. At times working with other veteran community organisations in order to achieve outcomes.

Advocacy achievements

Over the years, AWWNSW together with other interested parties has increased the awareness of the experiences of war widows and ensured that they were provided for. Significant achievements include:

- Establishment of the War Widows Pension
- Maintaining and increasing War Widow Pension Rates
- Establishing concessions on utilities and transport
- Enhanced access to medical care
- Restoration of in-home help and war widow pension for those who remarried
- 'unfreezing' of income support supplement caps
- Including veteran families as an interest group in the National Action Plan to end violence against women
- Placing veteran families on the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide's agenda
- Ensuring that bereaved children under 24 retain access to gold card when study is inhibited due to ill mental health; and
- Establishing War Widows Day in NSW.

Contemporary Challenge

As a key element of its Business, AWWNSW's approach to advocacy needs to be modernised and updated to reflect contemporary challenges facing all of those it now represents and supports. With the needs and demographics of its charitable member base much more diverse than in the past it is time for AWWNSW to take a more strategic approach to its advocacy work. This strategy seeks to address this challenge and provide a clear framework for not only how AWWNSW assesses, identifies and prioritises advocacy issues but importantly, what the issues are it is currently focusing on and key measures of success.

Social Policy Approach

AWWNSW has since its beginnings engaged in Social Policy Advocacy. At a high level, social policy aims to improve the wellbeing of individuals, especially those that are disadvantaged.¹ Social wellbeing encompasses material wellbeing (living standards), access to information, family relationships and life satisfaction.² While policy is predominantly concerned with what governments do and don't do, social policy can be viewed more broadly and includes economic factors, operations of communities, non-government organisations and family systems as all of these factors combined influence social wellbeing and outcomes.³ Importantly for AWWNSW and the veteran system, good social policy results from co-creation, design and implementation as opposed to a top down approach. At a time when Australian veterans and their families are demanding better for their future and those that come after, AWWNSW advocacy approach as never been more important.

When engaging in this form of advocacy it is important to consider the issues that organisations are advocating on strategically as this form of advocacy can be a vehicle for wider social change which can benefit many Australians.

ADVOCACY FRAMEWORK

Our Goal

The overarching goal behind our advocacy work it to ensure that the families of veterans are recognised, their experiences are understood and their needs (relating to their role or experiences supporting a veteran) are catered for and supported withing the Australian veteran support eco-system.

By the Australian veteran support eco-system, we include government, government agencies and departments; community and charitable organisations and; private organisations/ businesses that provide a service, support or program to Australian veterans.

Approach to Issue Identification

AWWNSW takes an equitable based approach to the delivery of its programs and services. This means that it focuses first on needs ahead of wants. Very simply, needs are the things that are important to ensure survival, the things that are essential in our lives and wants are the things that we can live without but would enhance our lives.

¹ p3 McClelland (2021) What is Social Policy; Social Policy in Australia

² p9 McClelland (2021) What is Social Policy; Social Policy in Australia

³ p10 McClelland (2021) What is Social Policy; Social Policy in Australia

AWWNSW identifies issues requiring advocacy through regular formal and informal consultation. AWWNSW takes a grass roots approach to advocacy to ensure it is accurately representing the views and interest of veterans' families. Such channels of consultation include:

- Surveys
- Discussion forums (online and in person)
- Social and Guild club/ group network
- Feedback register.

AWWNSW also reviews literature, research and evidence collected by government as part of its reviews and monitoring of the veteran sector and uses this to inform its approach and determine the appropriate timing to raise advocacy matters.

AWWNSW reviews where possible international approaches to veteran family-based matters to learn lessons from like countries and systems who are ahead of Australia's policy development in the area of veterans' families.

Issue Prioritisation

AWWNSW prioritises issues where its activity over a defined period can be concentrated achieve its overarching goal. With so many matters affecting different segments within the veteran's family population issue prioritisation is important. As is a criterion for determining which issues are to be pursued and when.

The following general criteria guides the prioritisation of advocacy issues:

- The importance of the issue to AWWNSW members and the veteran eco-system
- The opportunity the issue presents to intervene and prevent future problems
- AWWNSW's capacity and resources required to make progress on the issue
- The scale and severity of the issue
- The general community and political willingness to act on the issue
- Ability to have a measurable impact on the issue
- The availability of existing interventions focused on the issue
- Alignment with AWWNSW's strategic direction; and
- Social sustainability factors.

ADVOCACY AGENDA 2023-2024

After listening and engaging with our community over 2022-2023 the following advocacy priorities have been set for 2023-2024:

1. Mental health support needs of veterans families
 - a. Those bereaved by a service related death
 - b. Children of veterans who have died as a result of their service or of veterans who have been significantly wounded/injured or ill as a result of their service
 - c. Those who have experienced trauma related to a veteran
 - d. Those caring for wounded/injured and ill veterans
2. Equity in war widow and veteran family entitlements and concessions; and
3. Meaningful recognition and engagement of veterans' families within support system.

Priority One – Mental Health Support Needs of Veterans Families

Based on its work to date, AWWNSW considers that the mental health support needs of veterans' families are significant and must be supported. The needs of the entire group of veterans' families are vast and therefore need to be considered according to the most urgent need first. AWWNSW considers the following hierarchy of need the most appropriate when considering not only the qualitative evidence it has gathered but also the quantitative evidence.

Hierarchy of need:

1. Those bereaved by a service-related death.
2. Children of veterans who have died as a result of their service or of veterans who have been significantly wounded/injured or ill as a result of their service.
3. Those who have experienced trauma related to a veteran.
4. Those caring for wounded/injured and ill veterans.

Proof points:

- Research into suicide prevention shows that those who are at highest risk of poor mental health outcomes are those who; have a mental illness including depression, substance use disorders and psychosis, anxiety and trauma related disorders.⁴
- Research into the health and wellbeing of the families of Australian Vietnam War veterans indicates:

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6165520/>

- 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 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.
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics confirm that 3 in 5 (60%) veterans have a long-term health condition because of their service. It is reasonable to conclude that these health conditions impact upon families and increase the caring responsibilities of veterans' families.
 - The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has confirmed that 1,200 Australian veterans have been lost to suicide over the last two decades. The impact on their remaining loved ones is immense, particularly children.
 - Open Arms reports more than half of their counselling sessions are provided to veterans' families.
 - Mental Illness is systemically stigmatised in the Australia health care system. It is treated differently to physical health conditions creating additional barriers for those with conditions to overcome before they have access to treatment. Treatment is intermittent caused by annual limits on the number of treatment sessions patients can have, despite the ongoing nature of their condition.
 - Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) have been implicated in a range of negative health outcomes in adulthood, including mental disorders and suicide death.⁵ Long-term health impacts of ACEs which can be both physical and mental are only just emerging. Research to date has linked ACEs not only to increased risks of mental illness but also autoimmune conditions, respiratory diseases, diabetes, stroke, and cancer (Emerging Minds, 2021).

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6165520/>

Existing relief/ support for veterans' families:

- Counselling services through Open Arms, but counselling doesn't treat mental illness. It is a support mechanism. Open Arms as it is a government service provider is also plagued by red tape, forms and long waits which isn't ideal when people are needing mental health treatment.
- Psychology and psychiatric services can be available and funded by Open Arms in some circumstances for families of veterans, but this isn't well known. Sessions are limited as they are in the Medicare system and administrative burden on Psychologists is high.
- Children of veterans under 16 years have limited access to Open Arms sessions.
- Children of deceased veterans obtain a treatment card until they turn 16, unless they are in full time study or qualify for the extension. There are limited providers who provide this specialised assistance who will accept this card, due to the costs of treatment outstripping the rebate available to them, there is limited incentive.
- Medicare – mental health plans, subsidised access to psychology services but sessions are limited, and patient must continue to return to GP in order to access more, this can create gaps in treatment as GPs too are busy and difficult to access.

The relief provided within the system for the families of veterans to manage the mental health impacts of service and care responsibilities following that service isn't sufficient to meet the current and growing needs.

Priority Two – Achieving equity in war widow and veteran family entitlements and concessions.

Application of DVA policy

Continued shortcomings within DVA's Defence, Veterans' and Families' Acute Support Package create inequities among groups of widows and veteran families. In January 2022, these inequities were raised with the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission (MRCC) as the policy authority for the support package. The correspondence also asked key questions regarding consultation and decision making. The response from the MRCC more than 5 months later failed to answer questions or address the inequities within the policy.

Inequities are created as the policy places time limits on widows who are eligible for support under the package. The support package isn't based on need and leaves out those whose needs arose prior to its introduction, who didn't know of their entitlements, whose loved ones passed away at the wrong time or in the wrong way. The eligibility criteria does not treat all

or veteran families widows equally and results in widows whose needs could be addressed through this policy being left out of the support system.

Concessions

Veterans who pass away as a result of service-related injuries or illnesses generally have a DVA Gold Card. A proportion of these veterans are classed as totally or permanently impaired as a result of their injuries and or are eligible for this status. While the Gold Card is a health care card, it is also used by state governments as a concession card and provides holders with access to discounts from state and local government.

Following the passing of these veterans, widow/ers are provided with a gold card themselves. However, their ability to access concessions related to their entitlement to receive the Income Support Supplement (ISS) payment from DVA. This is a means tested payment which some widows are ineligible for as they are still working or have other forms of income.

As a result there are a number of widow/ers in NSW who are not able to receive the full range of concessions that previously as households they were receiving when their loved one was alive. This issue affects younger as well as older widow/ers in NSW and other states in Australia.

13,926 DVA recognised war widows across 129 NSW LGAs. 65% of these widows are eligible for the full range of NSW Government concessions, the remaining 4,845 are not due to being ineligible for the ISS from DVA.

Many of the 4,800 widows who are not entitled to the full range of concessions used to receive the benefit of the concession through their TPI, EDA or SRDP veteran, when they were alive and following their passing, that eligibility has been removed. AWWNSW is seeking equity in the application of State and Local government concessions to ensure that costs of living are mitigated for 30% of Australia's war widow/ers who are now on single incomes.

Key Facts

- Nationally there are 41,000 war widows of which 70% are in receipt of the income support supplement and 30% are not.
- The war widows' pension from DVA is \$1004.70/ fortnight for those eligible for the income support supplement (means tested) those widows receive \$1302.30/

fortnight. The comparable pensions for veterans who are TPI/ SRDP is \$1518.80/fortnight. Those who are also eligible for a service pension receive an additional \$700/ fortnight.

- Rate concessions are only available to DVA Gold Card holders' classes as TPI or EDA (extreme disablement adjustment) and war widows on the income support supplement.
- The 'younger' war widows, who are often working mothers – there is only 211 of these nationally, in NSW, there are less than 50 in NSW.
- We believe it ought to be made available to all war widows, particularly noting the current economic environment and in recognition of their live long service and support for our veterans.

Priority Three – Meaningful recognition and engagement of veterans' families within support system

One of the most important strategic priorities for Government is a very large increase in the size of the Defence Force, a target which almost seeks to double the personnel who wear our nations uniform. This is ambitious and challenging when the veteran system already has a long way to go to meet the needs of veterans and expectations of the Australian people. Despite the nature of their service, veterans do not exist within a vacuum. Veterans, like their civilian counterparts, exist within multiple systems of support that enable their service. As Australians we must do all we can to protect and promote the enablers to service in the ADF.

A fundamental enabler to service in the ADF has and always will be the families of our veterans. Data from successive defence census and family surveys show the main reason people choose to leave the ADF is due to the impacts of that service on their families. Families help them join, stay in, serve and when the time is right transition them back into civilian life. Families care for veterans if they become unwell due to their service and are the ones left behind and left out when a veteran passes away. Families in all their forms are the constant in a veteran's life, they are without doubt a protective factor and have positive impacts on transition and wellbeing outcomes for veterans.

However, in Australia, only a small segment of the veteran family community is supported or provided for within the veteran system. Even then, the support is limited and does not properly recognise the role they play, the burdens they bare and the impacts of the unique nature of military service has upon them. There is limited relief offered for veterans' families, yet the

system and the institutions within it continue to expect families to take on more and more when it comes to enabling ADF service and caring and supporting veterans following that service. They are expected to:

- be single parents
- move around the country
- have long distance relationships
- have and maintain a job
- not get sick
- meet the veterans' every need
- support veterans emotionally and sometimes financially; and
- manage the emotional and mental load of their families and the list goes on.

While it is pleasing to see progress being made to enhance support available to veterans and the closure of gaps in the system, it is fundamentally important to ensure that veteran families are not forgotten in all of the reform work. Progress in this area of veteran policy and support has been glacial.

For veterans families to be supported they must first be recognised and engaged in meaningful ways. As a starting point, AWWNSW considers that veteran families ought to be recognised through:

- Implementing the recommendations of the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal inquiry into recognition of members and families of members of the ADF who are injured, wounded or killed in service.
- Implementation of a National War Widows Day
- Including a definition of veterans' families in the revised Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act (MRCA)
- Including veteran families within the statutory remit of the MRCC
- Including family engagement within the transition provisions of the MRCA
- Removing and reducing privacy barriers that prevent engagement and
- Recognising and supporting the role of carers of veterans.

Auxiliary priority areas

With so much change happening within the veteran support eco-system that can and will have an effect on all segments of veterans families it is important that AWWNSW continues

to exercise its voice, consults its community and provides commentary on the following veteran related matters:

- Veteran Legislation Reform
- Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide
- Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence
- Cost of Living Relief
- Veteran Wellbeing Centres
- A whole of government approach to supporting veterans and their families; and
- National War Widows Day

The Australian Defence Force is a microcosm of the Australian population and by extension their families. This means that general social issues also affect them in addition to those produced as a result of the unique nature of military service. At times the relationship between general social issues and veteran related can be complex. It is important that the views and voices of veterans' families are heard in the following areas of policy and as such AWWNSW may provide commentary on the following matters from time to time:

- Suicide prevention and mental health treatment
- Domestic and Family Violence
- Diversity & Inclusion matters (Gender and ageism)
- Health care system, Medicare and PBS changes
- Home and aged care services; and
- Elder abuse.

Pursuit of change

AWWNSW will work with its stakeholders to deliver outcomes under this advocacy plan. The main mechanisms AWWNSW will use to deliver on its advocacy agenda include;

- Annual budget submissions to the Commonwealth and State Governments
- Building relationships with elected officials at the Commonwealth and State Government levels
- Building relationships with responsible government departments and agencies
- Participation in consultation forums, round tables and reference groups
- Ongoing engagement with the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide
- Written and verbal submissions to inquiries and parliamentary committees
- Building relationships with other veteran support organisations
- Publication of thought pieces and opinion pieces in media outlets and sharing among veteran community

- Undertaking human interest stories and case studies; and
- Building media relation activities.

Performance measurement

Progress under this strategy will be monitored by the Board. This monitoring will allow for changes to priorities and approaches to be made when required and in response to changes outside of the control of AWWNSW. Key success factors under this strategy include:

- The amount of progress made against each priority area in a 12-month period
- The amount and quality of advocacy outputs over a 12-month period.
- Achieving positive progress under each priority area.
- Being invited to comment and contribute to work under priority and ancillary areas.
- The number and quality of external stakeholder relationships.
- The number and quality of consultations delivered by AWWNSW in a 12-month period.

Priority areas will be monitored to ensure they are still relevant. Progress will be assessed at the end of every 12-month period and changes to priorities determined based on the assessment criteria noted above, changes in the strategic environment and the achievement of outcomes.

