

Joint Inquiry into the facts surrounding the management of Mr Jesse Bird's case

Inquiry Report

Introduction

In a public statement made on 19 July 2017 attached at **Annex A**, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel requested a joint review to be conducted with the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and Department of Defence (Defence) into the handling of Jesse Bird's discharge and case management. This review is in response to Jesse Bird's death by suicide on 27 June 2017.

The inquiry team was established, comprised of staff from DVA, Veterans and Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS) and Defence, to conduct a thorough investigation into the circumstances and management of Jesse's case.

(S 47F)

14 pages exempt in full (s 47F)

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Conclusion

The review identified 19 recommendations to improve the service and experience of veterans drawing from the learnings of Jesse's case. These recommendations include priority actions to current processes and

practices in DVA, progressing actions that are already being considered as part of DVA's Veteran Centric Reform program (VCR) and changes put forward to the Minister for Government consideration.

It is DVA's commitment to address the failures and shortfalls identified in this report with appropriate controls, and to put in place urgent changes in the provision of support to our veterans, especially those who are vulnerable or at risk.

VCR seeks to better know, connect and support veterans who serve or have served Australia, while continuing to respect that service. To achieve this, a coordinated approach is being implemented to ensure veterans are identified and proactively engaged, enabling them to access services at the time, and in the place, where they require support. Veterans will benefit from a new focus on early intervention and preventive health care, which will provide services to veterans before problems become more acute later in life.

VCR will change DVA's culture, operating model, and business processes and systems. DVA will continue to examine evidence and explore best practice service delivery to identify potential service delivery models to provide veterans with the best possible services. VCR will also complement other work across government supporting veterans, including the Prime Minister's Veterans' Employment Program.

Of the 19 recommendations, the inquiry team identified nine priority actions:

1. The Secretary to examine the areas of potential non-compliance with current legislation and policy to provide the Minister advice regarding any redress action/s.
2. Provide delegates with a clear statement of the policy and processes when considering an interim payment of compensation for permanent impairment to ensure that interim compensation payments are being provided in all cases where appropriate.
3. Put in place controls to ensure process of registration of claims is consistently followed when needs assessment is received and not delayed by other information that is not yet provided.
4. Enhance reporting and risk factor escalation between VVCS and DVA through an offering to clients that includes an 'opt-out' model of information sharing, so that all support services are integrated for clients with diagnosed mental health issues.
5. Put in place controls to ensure that complex case management is initiated for complex or high risk clients.
6. Revise Service Level Agreement Key Performance Indicators for information sharing with partner agencies (such as Defence and the CSC), including timeframes for DVA to request information as soon as possible after claim registration and timeframes for partner agencies to respond.

7. Review existing Service Coordination processes that provide coordinated, tailored and empathetic response to families, for relevancy in the case of the death of non-serving clients.
8. Educate staff and monitor implementation of the inquiry recommendations above.
9. Identify indicators for veterans at risk to develop best practice case management models.

Of the 19 recommendations, the inquiry team identified the following seven recommendations for DVA to continue as part of its VCR program:

10. Continue to pilot an integrated and holistic case management approach, including a whole-of-person view, a holistic care model for veterans, and an increased focus on transition support and vocational assistance. Subject the evaluation of this trial this will require further consideration by Government.
11. Implement better systems and processes to identify and alert staff in order to support high risk and vulnerable veterans.
12. Put in place wellness checks for uncontactable clients with mental health conditions and trigger additional support mechanisms for clients with mental health conditions who repeatedly submit incomplete documentation or exceed expected response timeframes.
13. Implement action to ensure letters and emails are accurate, easy to understand and appropriate in tone.
14. Implement action to ensure liability and compensation rejection or claim denial correspondence occurs only after a DVA staff member phones to discuss the outcome with a client. This discussion should detail:
 - a. the nature of the decision or determination;
 - b. opportunities for the member to appeal the decision, should they wish to;
 - c. alternative services that DVA can offer;
 - d. options to defer the decision and revisit at a later stage (e.g. once conditions have stabilised), not implications for recording times taken to process; and
 - e. DVA point of contact in case further explanation is desired.
15. Expand scope of reviewed circumstances to include services sought through other Government agencies and community services.
16. Introduce a case-response team with specified resources across public affairs, legal, strategic communications, executive and divisions to create a DVA response to emerging issues and messaging that is respectful and supportive in tone.

Of the 19 recommendations, the inquiry team identified three additional recommendations to the Minister for Government to consider:

17. The provision of more timely compensation payment by using a current assessment of the service-related level of permanent impairment, instead of delaying compensation payments until the service-related level of permanent impairment has stabilised.
18. The provision of more timely incapacity compensation payments for those former members of the ADF incapacitated for service or work by a mental health conditions, without the need for a determination that those mental health conditions are related to service.
19. Funding for a trial of an independent legal advocacy service to assist veterans with claim preparation and lodgements to enable long-term improvement in the quality of claims and ensure that veterans receive their entitlements with minimum administrative burden.

Annexes:

A. Statement Provided by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel

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C. Timeline of Events



The Hon Dan Tehan MP
Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister for Defence Personnel
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Cyber Security
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of ANZAC

19 July 2017

Statement provided to ABC 730

"According to the latest data there are more than eight deaths by suicide in Australia each day. Tragically, serving and ex-serving Defence personnel are not immune from this.

"I have asked for a review by both Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs of the handling of Jesse Bird's discharge and case management.

"Due to privacy reasons, I cannot comment on individual cases, but I will be meeting with Karen and John Bird in the coming weeks.

"We are transforming the way we deliver mental health care and support to our veterans but as a society we must be clear; one suicide is one too many."

Media enquiries:

Minister Tehan's Office: 02 6277 7820

Department of Veterans' Affairs Media: 02 6289 6203

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and free confidential counselling. Phone 1800 011 046 (international: +61 8 8241 4546). VVCS is a service founded by Vietnam veterans.

60 pages exempt in full (ss 47E, 47F, 47G)