



RSL
Australia



RSL AUSTRALIA
SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL
HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS
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Contents

RSL Australia – Who Are We?	3
Submission Overview	4
Statistics and Data (summary of suggestions)	6
Public-Private Partnerships	7
Government action.....	14
International Case Studies	15
Conclusion.....	20

RSL Australia – Who Are We?

The Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL Australia) was formed in 1916 in response to the lack of a unified approach to the organisation of repatriation facilities and medical services for those returning from the Great War. Since its formation, RSL Australia has evolved into the nation's largest Ex-Service Organisation (ESO), operating through a federated structure of State and Territory Branches and Sub- Branches, and representing approximately 150,000 members.

RSL welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan (The Plan). RSL Australia is a member-based charity with a network of over 1,107 sub-Branched and Chapters across New South Wales. Our sub-Branched are operated by veteran volunteers from all conflicts and stand ready to support their mates.

We co-ordinate with our sub-Branched to organise commemorations such as ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, and welcome new members and volunteers to assist with coordinating events to remember our veterans' service and sacrifice for Australia. The League also aims to improve social and holistic health outcomes for veterans across Australia through advocacy and guiding government policy.

Submission Overview

Veteran Homelessness

The RSL believes that everybody – especially veterans – should have the right to stable, ongoing accommodation that is safe and secure. The RSL also believes that working alongside government agencies, NGOs, charities, and academics could significantly reduce homelessness. The Plan offers the opportunity for coordinated, strategic efforts toward ending homelessness – the RSL submits that veterans should be included in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

The following submission focuses on the following issues:

1. Homelessness amongst veterans
2. Risk factors increasing likelihood of homelessness amongst veterans.
3. Short-, medium-, and long-term solutions for veterans.

Following the announcement of a Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide ('Royal Commission') in July 2021 to enquire into systemic issues and risk factors relevant to and suicide behaviours of serving and former-serving Defence members.

Over the course of the Royal Commission, it has been reiterated that lacking support to seek and retain meaningful employment, poor mental health, and struggles to reintegrate into the civilian community lead to the risk of, or the experience of, homelessness.

During the Royal Commission in Hobart, on 02 August 2022, homelessness amongst the veteran cohort was raised as a priority, with evidence tendered that estimated there were more than 5,700 veterans experiencing homelessness in Australia.¹

RSLA is committed to ending veteran homelessness across Australia. We understand many factors contribute to homelessness, including poor mental health, an unstable transition from the ADF to civilian life, unemployment, substance dependency, insufficient social support systems, and relationship breakdown. These are factors that are intrinsically linked and can create a cycle resulting in chronic homelessness.

¹ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, 02 August 2022 (Hobart, Tasmania), Opening Statement by Mr. Keven Connor SC.

Our recommendations have been informed through engagement with the Royal Commission; case studies of our Five Eyes Partners² and countries which have conscription apart of their National Service, including Israel, Norway, and Sweden; and our experience as a charity operating in this sphere. It is important the strategy consider challenges and successes from a broad evidence base and other jurisdictions and applies this knowledge to a contemporary Australian context.

We recommend a plan that:

1. Includes veterans and works collaboratively with government agencies to recognise their unique challenges, such as redeployment, postings, separation from homes, families, and support services.
2. Addresses catalysts for veteran homelessness and minimises the risk through State-Federal government partnerships and public-private relationships.
3. Utilises the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide as an opportunity to build upon existing frameworks and improve them so no veteran faces the risk of, or experiences, homelessness.
4. Implements priority actions formed through:
 - a. Listening to lived experience.
 - b. Evidence-based policy and best-practice
 - c. Public-Private Relationships and a State-Federal government response
 - d. Utilising charities and NGOs to improve positive engagement with veterans.

For the purposes of this submission, the definition of 'homelessness' has been adopted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which includes 'people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out, living in supported accommodation for the homeless, those staying with other households, in boarding houses, temporary lodgings, and 'severely' crowded dwellings³.'

²² Five Eyes will be referenced as FVEY and include *Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States*.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimating Homelessness: Census – Estimates of people who were experiencing homelessness or marginally housed as calculated from the Census of Population and Housing*, (Web Page 22 March 2023) < <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release> >.

Statistics and Data (summary of suggestions)

Currently, no jurisdiction has a proven methodology to support to collection and collation of data to direct public policy in prevention and intervention veterans facing or experiencing homelessness.

While the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has noted that '5,767 veterans are homeless, this number is likely to be an undercount, and the true extent of homelessness amongst the veteran population may be substantially higher than this figure⁴.'

For Australia to adequately prevent veteran homelessness and intervene where it has occurred, there needs to be reliable data and evidence collected, and ethical considerations observed.

Recommendation: State, Territory and Federal governments, with the aid of Ex-Service Organisations, to work collaboratively to validate or amend the existing data sets reporting upon veteran homelessness.

⁴ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Dr F. Hilferty et al, 'Homelessness amongst Australian Veterans' (Web Page, May 2019) < https://www.ahuri.edu/AHURI-Report_Homelessness-Amongst-Australian-Contemporary-Veterans_Final-Report.pdf >.

Public-Private Partnerships

Government and community service providers can reduce homelessness and support those at risk of facing homelessness through ongoing partnerships and information sharing to understand best practice.

Engagement with the private sector could provide meaningful employment to veterans and decrease the risk of veteran homelessness, minimise the risk of relationship breakdown, and improve family cohesion.

Throughout the Royal Commission, risk factors contributing to heightened risks of homelessness include relationship breakdown, 'being medically discharged from the Australian Defence Force, mental illness and being unemployed for more than three months following the transition from military service⁵.'

The Royal Commission has identified the following risk factors as contributing to veteran homelessness:

- a. Poor government supports and transition.
- b. Mental ill-health
- c. Relationship breakdown
- d. Substance dependency
- e. Unemployment

These five factors are often experienced together, and have been outlined in the order, which is seen most commonly, however, is not the only route to a veteran experiencing homelessness.

To minimise the risk of homelessness, wraparound supports, and medium-term engagement are required by the ADF and Department of Veterans' Affairs support and mental health practitioners. Minimising the risk of relationship breakdown, substance dependency and unemployment can prevent homelessness before intervention is required which can further.

Homelessness cannot be solved independently from these issues, so the requires the Plan should embrace a holistic approach that focuses on the needs of the diverse population of those at risk of homelessness.

Short-term solutions

Economic constraints, resource shortages and bureaucratic hurdles that require long-term planning and negotiation with councils often reduce the effectiveness of some short-term solutions maintained by charity organisations.

⁵ Dr. Hilferty, 'New Data Reveals True Extent of Homelessness for Australian Veterans' Kay Harrison (Web Page 17 July 2020), <https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/news/2020/07/news-data-reveals-true-extent-of-homelessness-for-australian-veterans> >.

Other jurisdictions, such as the United States, have begun repurposing old buildings and those abandoned to assist in community health projects. For example, Arkansas uses expired educational facilities with 'V2A staff and volunteers working daily on the organisation's mission to create a one-of-a-kind holistic support facility for veterans⁶.'

The use of these abandoned facilities could be implemented across Australia, leveraging private-public partnerships to provide support to the community and ensure that vulnerable populations receive the care that is required.

Private organisations could ensure the revitalisation of the site, in return for below-market rent, and government support to ensure the structural integrity of the building.

Innovative approaches can also be seen across the United Kingdom, which has 'converted some of their iconic red double-decker buses into accommodation, classrooms, diners and health centres, with their health and wellbeing looked after whilst in their care and given vocational and life-skills training⁷' Through public-private partnerships.

Recommendation: Utilise Crown land with vacant buildings for the introduction of transitional housing with community supports embedded within these facilities. Consideration must be given to the financial viability of the project, cost and risk analyses and structural integrity of the buildings at the site. These sites could include old health facilities, schools, and shopping precincts.

Negotiations between State and Federal governments could also aid in developers making apartments and studios available for veterans experiencing or at-risk of facing homelessness.

Medium-term Solutions

RSL Australia understands that the current housing crisis is impacting multiple vulnerable cohorts due to the cost-of-living crisis and other pressures that may cause these cohorts to fall behind when maintaining secure housing.

The only state to recognise this has been Tasmania, and forms part of its Housing Strategy, which is expected to be released in October 2023, and has a focus on 'providing social housing organisations to reprofile, repair, upgrade and redevelop their existing portfolios to improve dwelling quality, increase

⁶ Chandi Gregory, *COL Ross Speaks with Dist. 13 VFW about V2A Mission*, (Web Page 08 June 2023) < <https://veteransvillagesofamerica.org/blog/col-ross-speaks-with-district-13-vfw-members-about-v2a-mission> >.

⁷ World Economic Forum, *Cities and Urbanisation – How to solve homelessness: lessons from around the world* (Web Page, 18 December 2019) < <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/how-to-solve-homelessness-poverty-cities-urbanization/> >.

functionality and amenity, improve energy efficiency, and reduce the cost of living⁸.'

While this Plan is a long-term project taking twenty-years it is a project that will allow ongoing housing security and stability for all vulnerable cohorts. 'This has been improved by strengthening relationships with Centacare Evolve Housing and St. Joseph Affordable Homes as not-for-profit housing providers and Build Up Tassie are a great extension of public-private partnerships.

Recommendation: The Commonwealth to closely liaise with the Government of Tasmania to understand the way in which this initiative has been rolled out. By looking at Tasmania's approach, it may be applied nationally with amendments made to fit each state and territory as appropriate.

Long-term Solutions

Currently, all states and territories are experiencing the housing and homelessness crisis that has been fuelled by higher interest rates, inflation, cost-of-living increases and has further flowed on to impact local communities and their social wellbeing. Most recently, there has been concern about war widows and veterans' whose pensions are considered insufficient, war widows working multiple jobs to make ends meet, and insufficient support being the key driver of insecurity resulting in poor health and wellbeing outcomes for widows and veterans⁹', sometimes leading to homelessness.

RSL Australia understands that there will be no quick-fix and any proposed solution will require bipartisan support, engagement, and involvement from ESOs (Ex-Service Organisations) and NGO's. Thorough research and policy development and guidance from international allies will also be required to understand what best-practice looks like when applied to the contemporary Australian context.

⁸ Government of Tasmania, 'Tasmanian Housing Strategy: Draft Edition' (Web Page July 2023) < <https://tashousingstrategy.hometasmania.com.au> >.

⁹ Australian War Widows NSW LTD, 'Rising Cost of Living for Veteran Families', (Web Page, n.d.) < <https://www.warwidowsnsw.com.au/rising-cost-of-living-for-veteran-families/> >.

Recommendation: Establish channels of communication for government departments, ESOs, NGOs and charities to work closely with State and Federal governments to monitor progress and prevent, rather than intervene, in the case of homelessness.

Allow ESOs, NGOs and charities to develop a database system to understand homelessness data for their targeted cohorts. The establishment of this database should be used to ensure that ongoing supply for short-term housing is maintained, and adequate supports are retained to ensure best care is taken when assessing inpatients.

Meaningful Employment:

The lack of employment post-discharge heightens the risk of homelessness, especially where a veteran is unemployed for more than three months after their discharge date.

Developing public-private partnerships which have been trialled in other jurisdictions have assisted in providing veterans with meaningful employment, and significantly better outcomes. The Royal Commission has explained that under half of discharging ADF-personnel have found 'meaningful employment or, other engagement'¹⁰ with government seeking to determine why these programmes have not been as successful as first hoped.

For example, the State of Israel's national carrier, El Al Air has engaged with retired Israeli Air Force pilots to enter the commercial aviation sphere. 'El Al actively recruits Israeli Air Force (IAF) pilots due to their training and the defensive requirements of the fleet'¹¹ with this programme finding meaningful employment for those who have retired from the IAF and no longer meet legislative conscription requirements.

It is noted that this arrangement has been undertaken due to the unique defensive requirements of El Al aircraft and could be implemented through public-private partnerships with QANTAS, Virgin Australia, JetStar, Rex and other Australian commercial carriers.

Further, the United States has begun employing veterans in the US Federal Workforce, with an estimated '31% of the entire workforce being comprised of

¹⁰ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Melbourne Transcript Day 07, 05 September 2023 (Web Page, 12 September 2023) < <https://www.defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/transcript-day-7-melbourne-5-september.pdf> > [129].

¹¹ Ben Tal Ganancia (El Al CEO), 'Dina Ben Tal Ganancia: Breaking Barrier's' (Interview with the Airline Passenger Association, 23 September 2023) < <https://apex.aero/articles/elal-expo/> >.

veterans¹² with ambitions to increase veteran-employment and engagement in government departments, guided by the Interagency Veterans Advisory Council.

Identified within the Royal Commission, it has been explained that 'without any meaningful employment, it [life] becomes disheartening,¹³ ' and the establishment of employment opportunities for veterans, can greatly assist in better outcomes and the prevention of homelessness.

The Department of Defence and Veterans' Affairs has recently been working on civil recognition to support employment post-service, so an individual can have access to many different VET qualifications.

The below suggestions have been trialled in other allied jurisdictions with their respective government agencies engaging with veterans, improving veteran health and wellbeing. Developing relationships between the ADF, DVA, other government agencies and the private sector would require ongoing commitment to ensure that these relationships are viable and, ultimately supported.

By increasing the economic opportunities available, and having side supports for mental health, it may result in improved familial cohesion and decrease separation and minimise the risk of homelessness.

Suggestions: Engagement with public and private sectors to provide veterans with opportunities for meaningful employment, mental and physical health supports, financial advisors, and family counselling where appropriate to maintain family units and stability of individual veterans.

Mental health

The Plan is one which is aimed at ending homelessness however RSLA submits that those with 'chronic mental (and physical) health issues experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness¹⁴.' The Plan will require expertise and professional guidance to ensure that effective delivery is felt with wide-ranging wraparound supports.

¹² Courtney Buble, 'Percentage of Veterans in the Federal Workforce Stagnates at 31%' (Web Page, 10 November 2021) < <https://www.goveexec.com/workforce2021/11/percentage-veterans-federal-workforce-stagnates-31/186763> >.

¹³ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, 01 September 2023 (Melbourne, Victoria), Witness response to Madeleine Bridgett [30].

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021-22* (Web Page, December 2022) < <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/about> >.

There must be wraparound supports for all individuals experiencing homelessness with consideration had to their religious and cultural heritage, lived experiences, trauma/s, and health conditions, provided by specialist organisations and individuals who can best afford the care to end homelessness.

Recommendation: To have wraparound mental and physical health supports available to veterans and those experiencing homelessness when placement has been found. These practitioners could be found through community support networks, or partnership with 'Street Side Medics which is a not-for-profit organisation providing mobile outreach medical services for people who are homelessness or vulnerable.'

Unemployment

Veterans experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness associated with greater risks of psychological distress, relationship breakdowns and unemployment¹⁵.

Public-Private partnerships and dedicated services for the general population may assist in the development of life skills, employment training and service provision allowing long-term, stable employment. It is important to monitor the effectiveness of programs implemented by the Canadian and United Kingdom governments.

Relationship Breakdown

There are many considerable factors that are relevant to relationship breakdown, such as financial instability, unemployment, domestic violence and coercive control, substance dependency, and other factors that may not be easily seen or understood by external parties.

In the case of relationship breakdown, veterans who face homelessness must not be neglected, and be presented with adequate community supports to ensure stability and, where possible, attempt to keep the familial unit intact where parties are willing.

Substance Dependency

As explained, homelessness can be tied to 'situational stressors such as unemployment, financial instability, violence, and substance abuse¹⁶.' Any homelessness transitional accommodation will require ongoing support for those who have, past or presently, had a dependency on legal or illegal substances.

¹⁵ Dr. F. Hilferty (UNSW), Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 'Homelessness Amongst Australian Veterans: Final Report of the AHURY Enquiry, (Web Page, 2019) < <https://> >

¹⁶ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, 29 November 2021, (Brisbane, Queensland), Testimony and Medical Evidence by Dr. Seidler.

The relationship between substance misuse, abuse or dependency is often complex. Whilst the Australian Defence Force Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Program (AToDP) was launched in May 2002 with the ADF Mental Health Strategy, with a focus on 'harm minimisation, information and evidence-based programs designed to enhance the mental health knowledge of defence members.'

This internal-ADF program could be replicated to accommodate for former ADF personnel to reduce the risk of substance abuse and homelessness.

Poor government supports and transition

It has been established that those who leave any government institution such as out-of-home-care, correctional facilities, or hospitals are likely to experience homelessness due to 'poor identification of risk factors, inadequate transition planning, a lack of coordination in responding to unmet support needs, and limited appropriate accommodation methods upon exit¹⁷,' and the ADF is no exception.

'I lived on base, so it wasn't just my career I was losing, but also my home. I was told to pack at short notice and get ready to leave that day... I had very few friends outside the Air Force, and only one number to call. I experienced for the first time what homelessness felt like and I slept in my car. I was overwhelmed. I felt embarrassed, humiliated and ashamed, and a sense of worthlessness.

I also felt suicidal.¹⁸

Another submission noted that

'By the time the soldier is usually out of work, possibly penniless, homeless and suffering repeat bouts of mental health crises and going through the revolving door of state-based health systems, they have lost their reason for being, their peer support group, career, financial stability, potentially their family and self-worth. Recovery is a costly road to travel and discharge should only occur where they are deemed fit, or there are appropriate financial and medical support structures in place before discharge¹⁹.'

With consistent submissions arising from the Royal Commission, it is evident that any Homelessness Plan that includes veterans will require support from ESOs, NGOs, charities, the Department of Defence, and Veterans' Affairs with state-based Veterans' Offices being localised touch-points for veterans to seek assistance.

¹⁷ NSW Government, 'No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness: A framework for multi-agency action' (Web Page, October 2020) < https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/326055/No-Exits-from-Government-Services-into-homelessness-Framework-2020.pdf >

¹⁸ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide – Interim Report, Exhibit 12-03.001, Hearing Block 3, DLI.0000.0001.0013_R At 0013 [47], 0013 [50-53].

¹⁹ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide – Interim Report, Name Withheld, Submission, ANON-Z1E7-Q17Q-H, p [2].

Recommendation: Improve communication channels between Federal and State government agencies, ESOs, NGOs and charities for those who have targeted approaches for cohorts experiencing homelessness. Further utilise State and Territory Veterans' Office's to improve communication with their respective veteran communities to increase services and information available.

Government action

Governments and community providers minimising risk of veteran and general homelessness:

Focusing on intervention allows community and government to establish supports prior to a veteran experiencing homelessness and thus ensures an easier journey to combat homelessness, than waiting for homelessness to occur.

This is best accomplished through:

1. Strengthening common protective factors to reduce the frequency of homelessness occurring by attempting to address risk factors such as substance dependency, poor transition processes, and a lack of meaningful employment by improving community and government support.
2. Providing appropriate access to those who have substance dependency, improved ADF transition processes, and partnerships with ESOs, not-for-profits, and government agencies to engage with veterans to aid them in seeking and retaining meaningful employment.
3. Improving capacity for NGOs and ESOs to house veterans who are homeless as they are greatly hindered by lack of resources and often, staff who are volunteers.
4. A 'no wrong door' approach which allows health practitioners, ADF-services, and ESO's to be interconnected and develop cohesive policies and procedures to allow for timely referral to services that best meet the needs of the veteran seeking assistance.

Recommendation: Strengthening relationships between government, ESOs and NGOs to ensure that they are supported when providing services to veterans. Currently, their efforts are hindered due to resource constraints.

International Case Studies

Five Eyes Partners

Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Canada

The Government of Canada has committed to 'preventing and reducing veteran homelessness in Canada, with an estimate of more than 2,000 veterans experiencing or facing the risk of homelessness every year²⁰.'

The Canadian Government has outlined that the purpose of the Veteran Homelessness Program is to prevent and reduce veteran homelessness in Canada and provided through two streams:

1. The Services and Supports Stream focusing on the delivery of rent supplements and wrap-around services (such as counselling and addiction treatment) to veterans experiencing, or at risk of homelessness.²¹
2. The Capacity Building Stream focusing on research and improved data collection on veteran homelessness, as well as increased capacity of organisations to deliver tailored initiatives to address the needs of veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness.²²

Both these streams utilise the experience and knowledge of NGOs, charities and community providers who understand the various complexities of homelessness, and those with veteran-centric based-care and allows for greater community involvement in the care of vulnerable populations.

This program has been allocated a budget of CAD\$72.9M (AUD\$93,951M) to allow for the establishment of schemes and activities designed to

- a. Reduce veteran homelessness.
- b. Designed to prevent veterans and their families at imminent risk of homelessness from becoming homeless.
- c. To develop and expand the capacity of service providers operating in the homelessness and veteran-serving sector.
- d. To plan, coordinate and integrate responses to veteran homelessness²³

These wraparound supports and ongoing foundational community programmes have not yet implemented, so successes and failures of the Canadian Veteran Strategy cannot be analysed.

²⁰ Gouvernement du Canada, 'Veteran Homelessness Program: Overview' (06 July 2023) < <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/veterans/index-fra.html> >.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gouvernement du Canada, 'Services and Support Streams' (Web Page, 04 May 2023) < <https://www.omfrastriciture.gc/homelessness-sans-abri/veteranssupport/serv-soutien-fra.html#Toc2> >.

Implementation in an Australian context, with holistic mental and physical health needs, community guidance and support, skills and training development and assisted reintegration into the general civilian Australian population is something that should be strongly considered by the ADF, DVA, ESOs, charities and community providers.

The introduction of these programmes, their success and results ought to be monitored closely by the Federal government to determine how Australia can implement similar programmes, moulded to fit the challenges faced by Australian veterans.

United Kingdom

The end of 2022 saw the Government for the United Kingdom announce additional funding for veteran support services, particularly in relation to homelessness, employment, and the provision of holistic health care.

The new plan announced £8.55M (AUD\$16,446M) which aimed to end veteran homelessness in 2023, and the funding '900 veteran-supported housing units with specialist help for former armed forces personnel²⁴.'

OpFORTITUDE will also include funding for health, education and employment needs to assist veterans, with 'the additional funding ensuring the government's pledge in the Veterans' Strategy Action Plan 2022-24 to end veteran rough sleeping within this Parliament, delivered a year early²⁵.'

As the programmes and initiatives are slowly rolling out, criticisms and lessons cannot yet be learned as results are not yet known. Ongoing monitoring of the UK's progress is required.

Recommendation: The Australian government to closely monitor the success of the United Kingdom's Veteran Action Strategy Plan, understand its success and failures, and to implement similar programmes that would be effective in a contemporary Australian context.

United States

Boston University has recently been engaged by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs to undertake research to identify the number of homeless veterans across the United States, and to guide public policy to prevent veteran homelessness.

²⁴ Cabinet Office, Office for Veterans' Affairs, His Majesty's Treasury, 'New Funding and Support Scheme to Finally End Armed Forces Veterans' Homelessness' (Web Page, 21 December 2022) < <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-funding-and-support-scheme-to-finally-end-armed-forces-veterans-homelessness> > .

²⁵ The Rt. Hon. Minister for Veterans' Affairs Johnny Mercer MP, 'OperationFORTITUDE', (Web Page, 21 December 2023) < <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-funding-and-support-scheme-to-finally-end-armed-forces-veterans-homelessness> > .

It has been argued that more recent theatres of conflict, and modern weaponry contributes greatly to PTSD has increased the risk of homelessness compared to older veterans – however, veterans as a cohort faces homelessness at a greater risk when compared to the general civilian population.

This study aims to understand how many veterans across the US are homeless, those who have experienced homelessness, and whether there exist subsets of U.S. veterans who disproportionately face homelessness when compared to other 'categories' of veterans.

The U.S. Veteran Homelessness Plan focuses on six priority strategies in a multi-year, comprehensive approach to ensure that every veteran has a safe and a stable place to call home:

1. Making ending veteran homelessness a top priority.
2. Leading with an evidence-based housing-first approach.
3. Reaching underserved veterans.
4. Increasing the supply of and access to affordable housing.
5. Ensuring the delivery of quality support services.
6. Preventing homelessness amongst veterans.²⁶

By learning about what has worked for the U.S., it is possible to replicate some of their policies and initiatives to ensure the decrease and eventual end to general and veteran homelessness.

Recommendation: The Australian government to closely monitor the success of the United States' Veteran Action Strategy Plan, understand its success and failures, and to implement similar programmes that would be effective in a contemporary Australian context.

The State of Victoria (Australia)

Victoria has recently seen new reforms targeted at veterans' and their families and is currently undergoing their final stages of rollout. The Victoria Veterans' Card will address some cost-of-living concerns such as 'discounted light vehicle registration, free trailer and caravan registration, free marine licence, fishing licence exemption, free transport on ANZAC and Remembrance Days and veteran employment programs²⁷.'

Veteran Housing Australia P/L (VHA) has been established by CarryOn and is a registered community provider for veterans and their families. RSL Victoria has

²⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, 'VA Homelessness Programs – The Whole of Government Response to Homelessness' (Web Page November 2021) <

https://www.va.gov/HOMELESSNESS/The_Biden_Harris_Administrations_Strategies_to_End_Veteran_Homelessness.asp >.

²⁷ Victoria Government, 'Veterans Card – Victoria' (Web Page, n.d.) <
<https://www.service.vic.gov.au/services/veterans-card-victoria>).

been advocating for improved 'access to correct services and relationships, to introduce veterans and their families to services we know will effectively support their needs²⁸.'

The current approach RSL Victoria is taking will utilise ESOs, NGOs and charities to best support veterans find stability post-service and transition smoothly into the general civilian community.

Other Allied Countries:

Countries that have conscription as part of their national defence policy and strategy, often have better outcomes for veterans relating to social, physical, and mental health and familial cohesion. Whilst conscription and national service is no longer part of Australian defence policy and strategy, it is acknowledged by the Royal Commission and the broader community that we must do better by our veterans.

This part of the submission will focus on countries who have enacted national service and conscription as part of their domestic policy and highlight the ways in which homelessness is dealt with through collaboration of their social framework and attempt to understand how these policies can be transferred to work in the contemporary Australian context.

Finland:

Through research, there was no data found highlighting the experience of homeless veterans in Finland, however, a broader approach was taken to tackle homelessness.

This proposal included 'a targeted approach through a combination of financial assisted, integrated and targeted support services and more supply as solely using one of these levers is unlikely to work²⁹.'

Utilising this approach in Australia may be the way forward in ending homelessness and having dedicated supports to individual vulnerable cohorts respecting their needs, religion, cultural practices, and utilising trauma-informed approaches to assist reintegration and transition back into the mainstream community.

Recommendation: Utilise Finland's comprehensive approach to assist vulnerable cohorts experiencing or facing the risk of homelessness gain easily accessible integrated and targeted supports.

²⁸ RSL Victoria, 'Collaboration to Address Veteran Homelessness' (Web Page, 02 February 2023) < <https://www.rslvic.com.au/news/collaboration-to-address-veteran-homelessness> >.

²⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 'Finland's Zero Homeless Strategy: Lesson's from a Success Story' (Web Page, 13 December 2021) < <https://www.oecd.org/2021/12/13/finlands-zero-homeless-strategy-lessons-from-a-success-story/> >.

Denmark:

Denmark has recently introduced family supports before, during and after postings which assists the defence member, their spouse, and children to receive care to adjust to the difficulties of a posted defence parent. Reforms have been enacted by the Danish Ministry of Defence which have undertaken studies to improve support for veterans' post service.

Recent reforms undertaken by Denmark's government has centralised the Department of Defence to also look after families. This new approach has asked families to be considered as veterans, as families are integrated into the effort for the defence of Denmark. The veteran policy undertaken in Denmark has seen collaboration with state, region and municipal governments sharing the responsibility for the care and recognition of veterans.³⁰

The Danish Veteran Centre also provides for the provision of psychologists, and social workers aimed at comprehensive support, with integrated supports for employment and educational opportunities, translating military skills to civilian work requirements.

Recommendation: The Plan investigate, and where appropriate, apply international models to fit the unique needs and requirements of the Australian context and to ensure that veterans and vulnerable cohorts facing homelessness receive adequate and targeted support to aid them transition into mainstream communities

³⁰ VeteranCentret, 'Danish Veteran Centre' (Web Page n.d.), Danish Ministry of Defence, < <https://www.veterancentret.dk/en/> >.

Conclusion

The National Housing and Homelessness Plan presents an opportunity for inter-sector collaboration to minimise the risk of homelessness from occurring and prevent homelessness in all forms. The Plan should aim to demonstrate how it will decrease and prevent cycles of homelessness by improving safe emergency, transitional, medium- and long-term accommodation, and developing plans for providing wraparound support services tailored to individual pathways out of homelessness.

When dealing with veterans, ongoing communications between the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Department of Defence, state-based Office of Veterans' Affairs and ESOs is required to ensure that tailored support can be provided to pathways out of all forms of homelessness.

RSL Australia implores all relevant government departments to work together with key stakeholders, academics, and homelessness organisations to determine the best key performance indicators and methods to measure positive impact and overall progress.

While some case studies have shown dedicated programs focused on veterans, RSL Australia understands that homelessness is a complex issue, and any strategy difficult to implement for all vulnerable and general cohorts.

We welcome the opportunity to work with the Commonwealth Government to explore other initiatives and provide guidance to assist and guide public policy to prevent veteran homelessness.