

Submission
No 86

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Families of Veterans Guild

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FAMILIES OF VETERANS GUILD

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1 November 2024

The Hon Dr Sarah Kaine MLC
Chair, Standing Committee on Social Issues
NSW Legislative Council
NARRABEEN NSW 2101

Dear Chair

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the NSW Legislative Council's above Inquiry.

I enclose a submission on behalf of the Families of Veterans Guild (**'the Guild'**). The Guild empowers the health and wellbeing of the families of Australian veterans. From the moment a veteran commences their service in the Navy, Army or Airforce and for the rest of their lives, the Guild is open to the families of veterans.

The Guild is currently providing support to 2,245 families of veterans in predominantly located in NSW and the ACT. Since 1946 the Guild has been providing social and emotional support, a network of peers, understanding and advocacy for war widows and now all families of veterans. Through its work the Guild is:

- Reducing social isolation and loneliness
- Reducing impacts of physical or mental illness and injury
- Increasing individual resilience
- Suicide prevention
- Access to government and services
- Women's empowerment; and
- Building individual capacity & self-efficacy through skill building and education.

At the Guild, we are made up of the families of veterans, many of whom experience social isolation. We know firsthand the effects of this social issue and thank the NSW Government for inquiring into it. We look forward to learning more about what we can do to address social isolation and loneliness as a result of the committee's work.

Yours sincerely

Renee Wilson | Chief Executive Officer
Families of Veterans Guild

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SUBMISSION ON SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS: THE IMPACT ON VETERAN FAMILIES

The Families of Veterans Guild's ('the Guild') vision is to support, connect and empower every family member of a veteran. Be them a widow of war or service, a spouse of a veteran, a parent of a veteran, child or grandchild. We know that Defending Australia has consequences that impact more than just the veteran and it is time the support system recognised those too. The Guild's mission is to provide the defence and veteran family community with a voice, facilitate access to services, entitlements and support their social and emotional wellbeing.

The Guild supports all families of Australian Defence Force ('ADF') members and veterans. Regardless of whether their veteran is currently serving or has previously served, our priority is to support the health and wellbeing of their family. The Guild help them navigate the highs and lows of their journey in a safe and supportive environment and provide programs that address wellbeing needs. 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 1946, the Guild has been providing social and emotional support, a network of peers, understanding and advocacy to widows of war, veterans and defence service. The Guild now offers this support to all segments of the veteran family community because it knows the families of our veterans need an organisation that focuses on them. The Guild's founding philosophies continue today, it is fundamentally an organisation of women build by and build to; support and advocate for the needs of other women and their families within the defence and veteran system.

Causes and impacts of loneliness for war widows and veteran families

War widows and veteran families face unique challenges that can contribute to experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Some of these challenges include the following items.

Loss of a spouse or partner due to military service, which can result in grief, trauma, financial hardship and reduced social support.

A 2018 study (*Family Wellbeing Study*) found 16.8% of partners and 14% of parents was showing high or very high levels of psychological distress. 11% of partners and 12.9% of parents of former serving members also reported high levels of PTSD. There were higher rates of suicidality among family members with a total of 13.4% of spouses 10.6% of parents and 18% of adult children having thought about taking their life in the previous year. The study also pointed to the impacts of mental health adult children of both serving and former serving ADF members almost 29% of children displayed very high levels of psychological distress over the previous week's other signs of distress.

Transition from military to civilian life, which can involve changes in identity, roles, relationships, routines and expectations.

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide ('Royal Commission') found that families too also suffer in the aftermath of war service and defence and veterans suicide struggling with grief loss your mental health and adverse childhood experiences.

Physical and psychological injuries or illnesses related to military service, which can affect mobility, communication, self-esteem and quality of life.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics confirms 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.

Relocation and separation from family and friends, which can disrupt social networks and community connections.

The Royal Commission found there is a lack of information and poor communication across the entire veteran system with the family member and while some efforts are being made to engage



families the efforts are simply not enough. 2018 study (*Family Wellbeing Study*) found family relocations and residential mobility was seen as common; with one in five families had been in their present home for less than a year; two in five families had been in their present home for 2-3 years. These mobility rates are considerably higher than in the general population. Changing schools were also more common than in civilian families, with 20% of survey respondents having attended three primary / secondary schools and 38% having attended four or more schools. Additionally, approximately 60% of survey respondents felt that their employment and careers had been negatively impacted by their ADF members' military service.

Stigma and discrimination, which can prevent seeking help or accessing services.

The lack of support for veteran families couldn't have been made clearer by the Royal Commission. Families of veterans' carry the burden and cost of supporting ADF members, yet they often do so alone and isolated from each other, putting their needs last to be of service to their Veteran loved one and Australia. It isn't good enough to wait until a veteran dies or a veteran is in crisis before the system reacts. More needs to be done to address the needs of veteran families, including issues that result in social isolation and loneliness.

Impact of the challenges faced by veteran families

These challenges can have negative impacts on the wellbeing of war widows and veteran families, such as:

- Reduced sense of belonging, purpose and meaning in life.
- Lower levels of happiness, satisfaction and optimism.
- Higher levels of stress, anger, guilt and shame.
- Impaired coping skills and resilience.
- Decreased social participation and civic engagement

Social isolation and loneliness have a greater impact on mortality than smoking, obesity, or alcohol consumption. There is a strong body of evidence demonstrating the positive effect of social connection on individuals, helping guard against depression and burnout, which are all too familiar challenges facing veteran families. Engagement in meaningful group-based connections can help

individuals build a sense of belonging and purpose which positively impacts mental health and wellbeing while effectively addressing loneliness.

A study done by McFarlane (2009) found that children in defence families have the additional stress of having to deal with realistic fears about their parent's safety and wellbeing while on deployment. While all children cope differently with these fears, the study found that many coping strategies entail some form of social isolation or emotional detachment. The social mobility and relocations required of many defence families also caused severe disruptions to the children's social attachments. As children must adjust to new school environments and develop new friendships, their social development can either be enhanced or can be hindered leaving a child socially excluded and lonely.

About the Families of Veteran's Guild

The Guild is currently providing support to 2,245 families of veterans predominately in NSW and the ACT. There are at least 10,700 war widows in NSW and families of

One in twenty (5.3%) of Australian households reported at least one person who had served or was currently serving in the ADF. With 3.364 million of Australian households in NSW alone, we can estimate that there are veteran families in at least 178,333 households in NSW that contain a veteran. With 2.57 people per household in NSW there are at least 279, 982 families of veterans in NSW or 3.4% of the NSW population have a connection to a veteran; and are at a high risk of social isolation and loneliness for the reasons noted above.

Since the late 1940's the Guild has been delivering social support, bereavement support, education and skill building, advocacy and social connection to the families of veterans. From the widows of World War One right through to modern conflicts, the Guild has impacted thousands of lives of everyday Australians who quietly sacrificed for Australia's peace, security and freedom. Since 2021, the Guild has modernised its model of care for veteran families. Leading the way (as it did post-World War Two) removing all barriers to its services, support and organisation. Transforming it into Australia's only organisation that is there for all families, all of the time.

For the Guild and indeed Australia, this change cannot come fast enough. The harrowing and confronting experiences of the families of veterans shared over the last three years during the Royal Commission and the research it has highlighted – the need cannot be clearer. The Guild feels the



need to do what it can to alleviate the known challenges of defence service on families so that the peaceful and free Australia we enjoy today continues for generations to come.

Current ways the Guild is addressing impacts for war widows and families of veterans

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 through the following programs.

War Widows program

Our War Widows Program plays important roles in connecting war widows, particularly those over 65 years. Through a network of 50 Social Clubs throughout Sydney and New South Wales, the guild provides a place for war widows to meet and join with others who have been through similar experiences. These get-togethers are a safe space for war widows to make new connections, build friendships and feel seen, heard and valued by people who share similar experiences.

Lack of transport can be a barrier to social connection. For those who are no longer able to drive and cannot access Public Transport, the Guild provides to assistance and funds the costs of private transport for these war widows. The Guild also helps war widows connect to Community Transport in their area, thus providing options to attend war widow social clubs gatherings and even their local shops or go on outings.

The War Widows Friendship Line is a popular service provided by the Guild. Originally set up to help combat the social isolation felt by regional war widows, the Friendship Line now provides a sense of community and an opportunity for war widows cross NSW, ACT and Tasmania to share their stories and seek emotional support and comfort from one another. This is especially important for war widows who may not belong to a guild or social club or are isolated by health or distance.



Social Work and Wellbeing program

The Social Work and Wellbeing Program is dedicated to supporting and empowering defence and veteran families across Australia. The program is divided into two key areas:

- *Social Work* which provides specialist case management and social work services to assist families in navigating the challenges associated with defence and veteran life; and
- *Wellbeing services* which enhance social connection and peer support among defence and veteran families in Canberra and Sydney, as well as online.

Additionally, the Guild's online peer group, *Wellbeing Support for Defence and Veteran Families*, exists for families to find their peers in their local area, seek advice, and build new connections. This group also serves as a resource for information and education relevant to defence and veteran families. Also, the Guild hosts online events such as webinars aim to cover topics that empower defence and veterans' family members to live their best lives. The Guild seeks to break down barriers and encourage discussions that can be difficult but essential. Additionally, the Guild publish monthly newsletters and a quarterly journal to keep families informed and connected.

Advocacy

The Guild's advocacy provides a voice for war widows and veteran families. Through its advocacy, the Guild ensures the needs, views and opinions of families of veterans are heard, by the community, government and its departments. This has been the cornerstone of the Guild's work since 1946. It is through this vehicle that we make submissions, talk to government and stakeholders and raise the voices and experiences of the families of Australian veterans. The Guild's programs and services 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.

The Guild is currently developing its *Theory of Change* which will articulate and measure the impact that it has in its community and in Australia. While not yet completed, the Guild has mapped its work against the major social issues it is working to mitigate. These issues are:

- Reducing social isolation and loneliness
- Reducing impacts of physical or mental illness and injury
- Increasing individual resilience
- Suicide prevention
- Access to government and services
- Women's empowerment; and
- Building individual capacity & self-efficacy through skill building and education.

The Guild's programs & services have one inclusive target group – the families of Australian veterans. From the first day of service and beyond the life of the veteran the Guild is there to support the health and wellbeing of the veterans' family. The Guild's programs are already providing support to all families of veterans and particularly those with the highest levels of need. The Guild needs more support though to meet the growing demand and potential needs that exist within the NSW community, noting it is currently able to support 1% of the veteran families in NSW.

Conclusions

Throughout almost eight decades of operation, the Guild has seen the needs of families of veteran's change. However, some things have remained the same, they need each other, their wellbeing matters greatly, and they need to be empowered with skills to help themselves and their loved ones. They need support and a place to belong in the community. They need to be seen, heard, understood and their resilience supported.

Just like the war widows of 1946 and beyond, the women and families connected to the Australian Defence Force ('ADF') deserve a place in the veteran support system. Strong, resilient and healthy

families are a fundamental input to defence capability, successful veteran transition and positive health and wellbeing outcomes. As the primary support network for veterans, a critical factor in their decision to join, serve and stay in the ADF and a fundamental protective factor against suicide; we must step up as a community and ensure they are connected, supported and empowered.

Without them the Australian veteran system cannot support its veterans.

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