



Why Families of Veterans Deserve More than Tokenistic Support: Legacy's Call for Tangible Action

*Legacy Australia's response to the Royal Commission
into Defence and Veteran Suicide Final Report and
Recommendations*

November 2024



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Background

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide was established on 8 July 2021 by the Governor-General, His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) to investigate the underlying systemic factors contributing to high rates of suicide among current and former Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel. Over three years, the Commission engaged deeply with a broad range of stakeholders, including Legacy, the only national organisation dedicated solely to supporting the families of veterans. Legacy's involvement offered critical insights drawn from its extensive history of service, providing a unique perspective on the needs and challenges faced by the families of veterans.

"... Legacy, the only national organisation dedicated solely to supporting the families of veterans."

The Royal Commission's Final Report and Recommendations, released on 9 September 2024, highlighted major systemic issues that have contributed to the loss of defence personnel to suicide and contained 122 recommendations aimed at mass systemic reform. Areas emphasised for overhaul included improved mental health and wellbeing care, transition support and institutional inappropriate behaviour from sexual assaults to the unacceptable conduct of the military justice system. Throughout the course of the Royal Commission, Legacy focused on and advocated for the

recognition of the essential role families play in supporting veterans through multiple submissions made by the Legacy Clubs, reflecting a collective commitment to this cause.

Legacy's contributions highlighted the profound and often unrecognised impact of military service on families. Spouses, children, and extended family members are frequently the primary caregivers, yet they remain under-represented in service design and policy decisions. Legacy argued for a fundamental shift to elevate the families of veterans as key stakeholders, ensuring that their voices and experiences inform the development of support services. By advocating for a family-centred approach, Legacy emphasised the need for holistic policy-making that integrates the needs of both veterans and their families into every stage of service delivery.

Legacy's submissions also underscored the importance of sustainable, recurrent funding models. Rather than relying on short-term, one-off grants that create instability, Legacy called for a shift to stable financial mechanisms that enable consistent, long-term program development. This approach aims to provide reliable support to meet the evolving needs of veterans and their families, aligning with the broader goals of the Royal Commission for systemic change.

In addition, Legacy stressed the need for greater collaboration across government departments and called for specific legislative reforms to streamline support services and reduce bureaucratic barriers.

Legacy highlighted the importance of coordinated efforts to create a more cohesive, accessible support network for veterans and their families. Legacy is pleased to see these themes present in the final report.

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Legacy calls for immediate, meaningful action to honour the commitment shown by these families and to enact the necessary reforms that will provide them with the support they deserve. The importance of the Royal Commission to the defence community, where individuals have bravely shared their life stories and risked their mental health to contribute, was immense. It is now imperative that the Government responds swiftly and decisively, as a delayed response undermines the integrity of these contributions.





Formal Response

Legacy, Australia's only national charity exclusively supporting families of veterans, stands in firm advocacy for the implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. Representing over 30,000 family members across the country, Legacy's mission centres on ensuring that the families of veterans—essential stakeholders in veteran welfare—receive tailored, long-term support.

In response to the Commission's report, Legacy has identified the below recommendations that we deem are essential for upholding the wellbeing and resilience of families affected by military service. We urge the Australian Government, to prioritise these areas to effect measurable, meaningful change.

Recommendation

77

About this recommendation

Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs should fund and facilitate the development of a postvention network of suicide-bereavement resources in collaboration with ex-service organisations, states and territories, lived experience peers, and civilian support organisations to augment current postvention offerings, which can be inclusively accessed by and are tailored for the military community and all those affected by veteran suicide.

Chapter 20: Postvention

Develop a Suite of Postvention Resources in Collaboration with Stakeholders.

Legacy accepts and supports the creation of a postvention network, ensuring access to inclusive resources tailored for those affected by veteran suicide. However, we urge the Government to take measurable and concrete steps to meaningfully include families of veterans in all associated initiatives. Families of veterans are not just peripheral participants in veteran wellbeing—they are an essential, unique, and continuously underestimated cohort that plays a fundamental role in the mental health, stability, and resilience of those who have served.

To achieve the intended outcomes of this recommendation, it is crucial that the families of veterans are seen, heard, and integrated as key stakeholders from the initial stages of policy and resource design, through to implementation. Legacy believes that involving these families in a meaningful way will enhance the efficacy of wellbeing programs, better address specific challenges faced by families of veterans, and

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provide a more comprehensive support framework that reflects the realities of service-related challenges across generations.

Legacy calls on the Government to prioritise family perspectives in decision-making processes, consultation forums, and postvention resource development, and can support Government in accessing and hearing from these families directly. Recognising and elevating the voices of the families of veterans will help ensure that they receive the support they deserve and are empowered to continue supporting their veteran loved ones in meaningful and lasting ways.

Additionally, Legacy advocates for active collaboration with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to strengthen suicide prevention efforts, drawing inspiration from successful international models such as Canada's "Buddy Up" program, which pairs at-risk individuals with peers who can provide ongoing support and connection. While Legacy primarily functions in a postvention space, we are aware that many of the complex traumas and issues our families face begin to emerge while the defence member is still in active service. It's fundamental that Legacy be involved in a redesign of support for active defence personnel's families as the leading experts in providing care for families of veterans.

Legacy's model is intrinsically based on building a robust sense of community and belonging for our families; through our network of Legatees, family events and peer networks, we create lasting

connections that foster resilience, reduce isolation and offer a critical sense of shared purpose and understanding among veterans, their families and their communities.

Legacy is ready to contribute invaluable insights and expertise from our strong ties with the families of veterans to help shape policies that reflect their needs and experiences. Supporting, and representing, over 30,000 family members across Australia, Legacy remains committed to supporting families of veterans with both preventive and postvention resources that foster resilience, support mental health, and reduce isolation within the veteran community.

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Recommendation

87

About this recommendation

The Australian Government should establish a new executive agency focused on veteran wellbeing. The new agency should have distinctive branding, but administratively nested within the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to enable seamless information sharing and referrals. Its primary functions include supporting veterans' transition to civilian life, providing system navigation and wellbeing support, and improving referral pathways by integrating services across various organisations. Additionally, the agency will co-design wellbeing programs with veterans and ex-service organisations, have staff with lived military experience, and adhere to a trauma-informed, customer-focused approach, led by a CEO reporting to the Secretary of DVA

Chapter 24: Empowering veterans to thrive

Establish a New Agency for Veteran Wellbeing.

Legacy supports the establishment of a Wellbeing Agency within the Department of Veterans' Affairs, prioritising seamless transitions, wellbeing programs, and effective service pathways for veterans and their families. We believe this agency is essential in addressing the unique challenges veteran families face, and Legacy is prepared to play an active role in its development.

Throughout the submissions made by the Legacy Clubs, we have recommended the uptake of our industry-standard Case Management model, a data-backed, personalised wellbeing support service for the families of veterans. The established infrastructure and networks that facilitate this model can and should be leveraged to provide support service or transitioning personnel, veterans and their families in a holistic approach. Legacy can provide this foundation to an agency in line with this recommendation.

To ensure the agency meets the real needs of the families of veterans, Legacy must be included in the co-design phase, so that these families are fully eligible for transition and service program support. With over a century of experience supporting the families of veterans, Legacy offers a data-backed, community-centric model of support that can serve as a solid foundation for the DVA to build the recommended Wellbeing Agency upon.

Legacy's professionalised case brokerage service provides tailored, acute, and long-term welfare support to families of veterans. This includes navigating the complexities of ex-service community resources to foster post-traumatic growth, resilience, and long-term stability. Through our skilled team, we ensure that our families receive the practical support they need and connected with a like-minded community that understands their experiences. These programs and services are designed not only to address immediate needs but to empower our families to build brighter, sustainable futures.

In order for Legacy to continue to provide our invaluable services, gaps in data sharing and referral pathways must be addressed. The Government must consider the impact that policy relating to privacy concerns and referral pathways has had in creating significant barriers for veterans and their families engaging with the expert ESO support that they need. We must work together to ensure that no more families fall through the cracks.

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Legacy remains committed to advocating for the families of veterans as essential stakeholders in this Wellbeing Agency and calls on the Government to provide the necessary funding and resources to ensure Legacy sustains the vital services we are providing in line with Royal Commission recommendations. Together, we can create a resilient, compassionate support network that honours the service of our veterans and the sacrifices of their families.

Recommendation

89

About this recommendation

The Australian Government, in consultation with ex-service organisations (ESOs), should establish a national peak body for ESOs following a co-design process. The role, functions, membership, governance and funding model of the peak body should be informed by the outcomes of the business case, and agreed between the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the ESO sector. The funding model should not exclude participation of any eligible ESOs, particularly those who operate on a not for-profit basis

Chapter 24: Empowering veterans to thrive

Establish a National Peak Body for Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs).

Legacy welcomes the proposal for the establishment of a National Peak Body for Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs), viewing it as a critical step in fostering collaboration, consistent advocacy, and systemic improvements for the support of veterans and their families. This unified body will be instrumental in securing sustainable resources and enhancing the overall impact of the sector, creating a more cohesive and effective support and advocacy system.

As the only national voice positioned to advocate exclusively for the families of our veterans, Legacy is committed to ensuring we play a leading role within the peak body. Legacy will leverage our established relationships with other prominent ESOs and our deep, daily engagement with our families, enabling us to genuinely represent the needs and concerns of those we serve. To ensure the most effective representation and collaboration, we urge the Government to co-design clear criteria for identifying leading ESOs in Australia based on clear parameters including social impact, client numbers and minimum threshold for welfare expenditure. Providing appropriate funding and authority to these representatives will be essential for holding the Government accountable and enabling the development of collaborative, holistic programs.

Legacy is dedicated to providing this contemporary, professional representation, centering on the unique needs of the families of veterans. We are committed to ensuring these

families receive ongoing support, advocacy, and a clear pathway through often complex processes. Our skilled team remains focused on making sure that no family is left to navigate these challenges alone and we believe that organisations like Legacy should play a pivotal role in shaping the evolving definition of family within the veteran support framework, reflecting the diverse and changing nature of family structures today.

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Engaging with government officials and policymakers will be crucial for driving the necessary changes and securing the resources required to enhance and sustain our services. As part of this peak body, Legacy will advocate for stable, recurrent funding models that move beyond the limitations of one-off grants.

We believe that long-term funding enables transparency and ongoing communication with our supporters, beneficiaries and the broader community, which is essential for building trust and demonstrating our commitment to action.

Legacy is ready to work alongside the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Government, using our practical experience and deep expertise to ensure

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that the structure and operations of the peak body are fit-for-purpose for the families of veterans. We welcome any legislative changes that support impacted families and recognise the importance of cross-departmental collaboration. An example of this is engaging the Australian Defence Force in key fundraising initiatives, including the potential establishment of an employee giving program similar to Police Legacy's model.

In joining this National Peak Body, Legacy reaffirms its commitment to being a strong advocate for families of veterans, using our proven support models and collaborative approach to ensure a brighter, more secure future for all those impacted by military service.

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Recommendation 103

About this recommendation

To better support Defence families and enhance their well-being, Defence should expand family support programs through co-design with members, families, and advocates. This includes improving access to services, providing evidence-based resources during times of stress, offering family therapy, and enhancing communications. Additionally, Defence should evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives and work with governments to improve employment opportunities for partners and childcare services for Defence members.

Chapter 24: Empowering veterans to thrive

Improve Support, Communication, and Services for Defence Families.

Legacy applauds and strongly supports the recognition of families as integral to the health and wellbeing of both serving and ex-serving ADF members, as highlighted by the Royal Commission. We are grateful for the acknowledgment of the unique and significant role families play, not only in supporting veterans but also in their own right as primary caregivers and support systems. To truly achieve the objective of lifetime wellbeing, it is essential that support initiatives extend beyond the veteran to encompass the entire family unit.

Legacy advocates for a broad and inclusive definition of family that authentically reflects the diverse and complex nature of family structures within the ADF community, ensuring these relationships are clearly and meaningfully articulated within the legislative framework. We believe in recognising the full spectrum of families—including spouses, children, kin carers, and extended family members—to account for the diverse nature of family and kinship structures, especially among Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families within the Australian defence

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and veteran community. Service affects not just the individual veteran but their entire family unit, and we urge policymakers to incorporate this understanding into all aspects of support and service delivery.

One critical area where these families need more support is during the bereavement process. Legacy strongly advocates for a fit-for-purpose Bereavement Letter from the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) that acknowledges Legacy as the provider-of-choice for bereaved families of veterans. Families navigating the loss of a loved one deserve timely, clear, and trauma-informed communication, as well as access to tailored resources that can help them manage this difficult transition.

We also highlight the urgent need for reforms that ensure fair treatment for families of veterans, particularly when it comes to financial security. The current interpretation of legislation by the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation (CSC), which leads to the rejection of reversionary pensions for former partners following the death of a veteran, is a concerning example. This practice effectively penalises partners who may have faced and fled domestic violence, leaving them financially vulnerable after the veteran's death. Legacy will continue to advocate against such policies, pushing for legislative changes that safeguard the financial wellbeing of these families.

Legacy emphasises the importance of shifting the focus to the families, even those supporting incapacitated veterans,

rather than a focus on the veteran as the primary stakeholder. This approach centres the family in the central role, and recognises their ongoing needs and contributions, even after the veteran has passed away or moved on from active service. By placing the families at the heart of veteran support initiatives, we can build a more comprehensive, compassionate, and effective system.

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In advocating for these changes, Legacy draws on our extensive experience working directly with families of veterans, offering professional case management and holistic support services that promote resilience and post-traumatic growth. We remain committed to using our practical expertise to inform policy development and to ensure that these families are properly recognised, supported, and empowered throughout their journey.

Legacy will continue to push for policies that acknowledge the lifetime impact of service on families and work towards a future where families of veterans receive the care, respect, and support they deserve.

Recommendation 104

About this recommendation

The Australian Government should enhance the Defence Family Advocate's role by providing appropriate staffing, resources, and formalising its relationship with the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner. Additionally, it should ensure the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner is properly resourced to represent families of veterans in policy and decision-making. The possibility of shared administrative support between the two roles should also be explored to improve collaboration and efficiency

Chapter 27: Importance of families

Strengthen the Defence Family Advocate's Role.

Legacy has always been dedicated to supporting the families of veterans impacted by service, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to continue this vital work. However, as we face an evolving landscape of challenges, our current focus is on moving further upstream as part of a broader community of care providers, aiming to assist in suicide prevention. We firmly believe that the role of the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, alongside the Defence Family Advocate, is crucial in achieving this goal.

To ensure comprehensive support for families during their transition to civilian life, Legacy calls for a better-resourced Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner to support the Defence Family Advocate. This includes the establishment of state-based Deputy Commissioners, who can provide localised, tailored support, in a similar way that the state-based Defence Family Advocates support the Defence Family Advocate. It is imperative that the Government recognises the importance of this role and allocates sufficient resources to address the diverse needs of ADF families, particularly as they

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navigate the complexities of transition and adjustment.

Legacy also emphasises the critical need for addressing the social and mental health needs of the entire family unit as part of an integrated approach to mental health management and suicide prevention. The families must receive clear, up-to-date information about changes within the ADF, and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), including legislative updates such as those related to the harmonisation process. Improved communication and the involvement of families of veterans in the care of their loved ones are essential to creating a truly supportive environment.

We acknowledge the profound and lasting impact that trauma, including suicidal ideation, can have on families, long-term. The risk of intergenerational trauma due to suicide is a significant concern for Legacy, particularly in relation to its impact on children and other family members of veterans. We understand the unique challenges faced by these families and are committed to providing the necessary support to mitigate these effects.

Legacy is dedicated to connecting affected families with specialist mental health services, ensuring they receive expert care that meets their needs. Our role is to facilitate access to trusted providers, offering a seamless pathway to the resources required for effective support. Early intervention, comprehensive advocacy, and ongoing assistance are key components of our approach, aimed at

preventing loss and fostering healing and resilience within the veteran family community.

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In supporting the strengthening of the Defence Family Advocate's role, Legacy calls for additional resources and an expanded remit to include early intervention programs that address the intergenerational effects of trauma and suicide. By bolstering family support through transitional periods and offering access to specialist mental health services, we can promote long-term wellbeing and resilience.

Legacy remains committed to advocating for a holistic approach that places the wellbeing of families of veterans at the forefront of suicide prevention efforts. We believe that by working together with government, the Defence Family Advocate, the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, and other care providers, we can create a more robust and effective support system that honours the sacrifices of both the veteran and their family, while fostering a future of healing and hope.

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Conclusion

The findings of the Royal Commission have shone a light on many of the systemic issues Legacy has long highlighted—the urgent need for sustainable mental health support, better transition services, and comprehensive, family-centred care. However, we must now move beyond acknowledgment and into decisive action.

We call on the Australian Government to recognise Legacy’s legitimacy as the representative voice for the families of veterans and to formally incorporate our insights into the implementation of the Royal Commission’s recommendations. As a trusted advocate for over 30,000 family members across the country, Legacy’s strength lies in its deep connection to the community, underpinned by decades of direct experience and extensive, data-backed evidence, and a century of knowledge. We are uniquely positioned to offer practical solutions grounded in generations of lived experiences of the families of veterans, providing an informed perspective that the Government cannot overlook.

“We possess a wealth of family data that surpasses that held by many, enabling us to understand what support needs to look like, how it should be delivered, and the impacts it can have when done right.”

“We urge the Government to seize this moment of opportunity to transform the support landscape”

Legacy is not adversarial; we are solutions focused. We are here to collaborate, not criticise, and we bring with us the collective voice, knowledge, and data of the families who form the backbone of veteran care. We possess a wealth of family data that surpasses that held by many, enabling us to understand what support needs to look like, how it should be delivered, and the impacts it can have when done right. Our professional, community-based approach offers a proven model of care that should serve as the foundation for shaping policy and designing effective services.

The Government must act now, not only to address the systemic issues identified but also to ensure that families of veterans are placed at the heart of veteran wellbeing initiatives. These families are not peripheral, they are primary stakeholders who must be fully integrated into all decision-making processes, from the design of pre- and postvention resources to the establishment of new wellbeing agencies. Legacy is ready and willing to contribute its expertise to ensure these efforts are fit-for-purpose and truly reflective of the needs of the families of veterans.

We will continue to advocate for recognition, collaboration, and sustainable action. We urge the Government to seize this moment of

opportunity to transform the support landscape for both veterans and their families, creating a future where their sacrifices are honoured with the care, respect, and comprehensive support they so rightly deserve. Legacy stands prepared to lead, partner, and ensure that the voices of families of veterans are not only heard but placed at the very centre of systemic reform.

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Together, we can build a resilient and compassionate network of care that truly honours the service of our veterans and the sacrifices of their families.

