

SUBMISSION BY ATDP REGIONAL MANAGERS

ON

A NEW INSTITUTE OF VETERANS' ADVOCATES

INTRODUCTION

The overriding impression left by the discussion paper is that it has been authored by writers with little understanding of Military Advocacy. Terms such as 'welfare' and 'claims related' advocacy were abandoned nearly a decade ago because they do not suitably describe the needs of veterans and their families resulting from military service. 'Welfare' is provided to support those in the community who are financially or socially disadvantaged. Military Advocacy seeks to support the *wellbeing* of veterans and their families and to provide assistance in securing *rehabilitation and compensation* entitlements in respect of injury or disease arising out of relevant military service.

While the paper purports to be the work of the ESORT Advocacy Working Group it is understood that Working Group Members had no opportunity to provide feedback prior to its release to the general veteran population for comment. We are concerned that the discussion paper speaks only to the establishment of a Board and provides scant information on Commonwealth (financial) support of the Institute, its operation, or how it is envisioned that it will be able to exert any influence on aspects of Military Advocacy.

GOVERNANCE

The proposed composition of the initial Board is noted. It is considered that two aspects give rise to concern:

- a. Representation of commercial service providers would seem to be mandatory if any influence is to be exerted on their operation; and
- b. What safeguards are to be put in place to ensure that a Board 'takeover' by commercial interests is not possible ?

PROFESSIONAL INDEMNITY INSURANCE

The 'Institute's professional indemnity (PI) scheme' is mentioned. As this would represent a major change to the existing PI insurance arrangements through the Veterans' Indemnity and Training Association (VITA) it is considered necessary to elaborate on the scope of this proposal. Is the Institute to act as a broker or an insurer ? If it is to act as an insurer how is the mandated financial backing to be secured ?

ETHICAL AND SERVICE STANDARDS

The paper outlines several activities, including establishing ethical standards, service delivery expectations, training and professional development requirements, compliance monitoring, complaints handling and quality assurance measures. Each of these activities has a not inconsiderable human resource overhead but the paper is silent on how these activities are to be provided or funded.

MEMBER BENEFITS

The range of member benefits proposed is welcomed while at the same time noting that some of those proposed have been sought for many years by ESOs and Military Advocates without success.

FUNCTIONS

Government and Departmental support would seem to be critical to the success of the Institute. The proposed Memorandum of Understanding is therefore a pivotal document. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to be concerned that the operations of the Institute may be vulnerable to the withholding of resource support (human and/or financial) if the Department objectives do not coincide with those of the Institute Board.

Availability of existing advocate data to the Institute would appear to be a major impediment to the success of the Institute given the Department's current interpretation of Privacy Legislation.

IMPLEMENTATION AND OPERATION

At its closing, members of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide were both directly and indirectly critical of the Department's ability to give the impression of progress while actually ensuring that the status quo was not disturbed. It would be of the greatest disservice not only to veterans and their families but also to ATDP and the advocates it has accredited for the Department to see the Institute as a tool under its control either directly or indirectly.

The development and implementation of a Memorandum of Understanding in good faith and more importantly, its implementation without interference, is critical to the success of the Institute.

Further, a much better understanding of how the Department sees the Institute's PI insurance function being supported by the Commonwealth is necessary before unqualified support could be assured for the proposal.

CONCLUSION

While the proposal to establish an Institute of Veterans' Advocates is to be applauded the success of the venture is too dependant on unknown levels of Government and Departmental support to give unequivocal support at this stage. This is reflected in the number of phone calls from Advocates to Regional Managers requesting more information on the Institute before they can make an informed decision.

The Institute success is dependant on the structure of the MoU and the Institute, PI insurance arrangements, financial start-up and ongoing support and the unequivocal goodwill and cooperation of the Department and its Institute support staff.

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