

VETERAN FAMILY COMMISSIONER

2025 Impact Statement

Introduction

The Government's decision to embed a dedicated voice for families of veterans at the highest levels of policy and decision-making ensures that there is a formal avenue for needs of veteran families to be prioritised, and that solutions which help families to thrive can be elevated and acted upon.

My role is to hold the Department of Veterans' Affairs to account, and I have found an organisation that is willing to do the work. Since taking on the Commissioner role, I have seen a genuine commitment to reform, with a culture increasingly focused on learning and improvement. Even in a short time, I have already seen progress.

Another core part of the responsibility of the Veteran Family Commissioner role is to provide clarity about what is changing, and where progress is being made. Communicating impact and outcomes is essential to building understanding and accountability.

I am conscious that change happens at different speeds. Legislation takes time, policy moves a little more quickly, and programs faster still. Across all of this work, I am focused on clearly articulating outcomes and measuring progress.

Although I have only been in the role for four months, it is my commitment to report transparently on impact each year. This statement marks the first step in that ongoing accountability.



Annabelle Wilson
Veteran Family Commissioner

The story so far...

The focus this year has been on discovery: understanding where appetite for change exists and building relationships to support delivery. One clear theme to emerge is an appetite for a shift in the way DVA tells its story, recognising this as long-term change and culture-building work. Progress and early outcomes have been achieved across all four defined focus areas, alongside the initiation of larger bodies of work that will continue to mature and deliver impact over time.

Focus Area 1

Equity of Eligibility
and Access

Focus Area 2

Clarity and Improvement of DVA
Services and Supports for Families

Focus Area 3

Enhancement of ESO
Partnerships and Supports

Focus Area 4

Build Life Foundations
and Cultivate Belonging

Mission:

Remove barriers, amplify lived experience, and create equity so all families of veterans thrive.

Vision:

A system that shows up for families of veterans and empowers them to build safe and fulfilling futures.

Focus Area #1

Equity of Eligibility and Access

Royal Commission Recommendations targeted



Defence and veteran families wellbeing strategy actions targeted



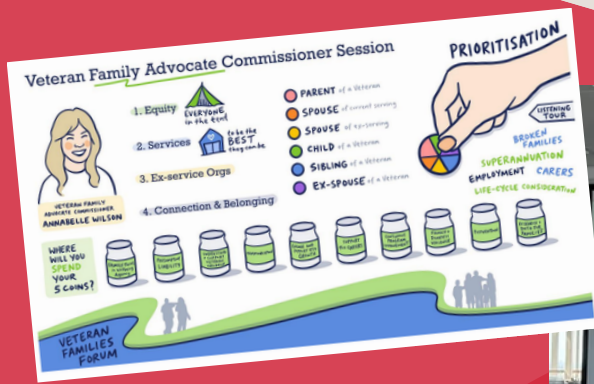
2025 Outcomes

Improvements to Data Capture and Reporting on Families and Family Structures are progressing. By linking insights directly from the voices of families of veterans through the 2021 Census and previous AIHW work, we can fairly quickly set in motion a research stream grounded in lived experience insights, ensuring future programs are shaped by evidence rather than assumptions.

It's also important to me that the next Census poses questions in a way that allows families of veterans to understand that the data collection that applies to them, so they can participate.

Working with the Open Arms team has allowed the clear feedback from the 2025 Veteran Family Forum to be operationalised. This has resulted in a review of the Open Arms Model of Care to better support our Children. A specialist consultant will begin designing a needs-based mental health service for children and young people in January 2026.

Open Arms is also strengthening workforce capability, so that staff are better equipped to support children and families, improving access, early intervention and trauma- and military-informed care. In addition, changes to the Treatment Principles now allow Open Arms to expand its Outreach Program to a broader range of providers, increasing access to qualified professionals for veteran children and young people.



Focus Area #2

Clarity and improvement of DVA Services and Supports for Families

Royal Commission Recommendations targeted



Defence and veteran families wellbeing strategy actions targeted



2025 Outcomes

Influenced national discourse by embedding the term “families of veterans” into ministerial and departmental language, clearly distinguishing families as a group with unique needs. This ensures families are recognised in their own right rather than assumed within the broader concept of the veteran community, supporting more targeted and responsive policy.

Secured the inclusion of families in the 2026 ANZMIC conference Moral Injury abstract, positioning them as essential stakeholders in the emerging post-Royal Commission discourse on moral injury. This ensures early research acknowledges the unique burden families carry — including the betrayal felt when navigating complex administrative processes following a veteran’s injury or death — and embeds family perspectives in the foundations of future policy and clinical responses.

By publishing clear links to relevant research papers and activities across the Veteran and Family Wellbeing Hubs network, I’m beginning to position the Commissioner webpage as a resource for veteran families, supporting informed decision-making, strengthening transparency, and connecting families with evidence, initiatives and opportunities across the system.

Established clear and sustainable working rhythms between the Defence Family Advocate and the Veteran Family Commissioner, defining complementary responsibilities and building on each organisation’s strengths. This alignment positions us to better respond to Royal Commission recommendations and deliver a more coordinated, effective advocacy system for families of veterans.

ANZMIC 2026

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21-22 MAY 2026 • HOTEL GRAND CHANCELLOR, LAUNCESTON

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Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner – Annabelle Wilson

Last updated: 17 November 2025



Summarise this page

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Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, my main role is to represent veteran families and advocate for policies, programs, and services that help them deal with the challenges of war and veteran family life. I do this by collaborating with the community, finding areas that need support, and advocating for flexible and supportive systems for veteran families and this everything from enrolment to the end of their lives and beyond.

FAMILIES

My story, and my plan

COMMISSIONER ANNABELLE WILSON

Veteran Family Advocate

Member of the Australian Government's Veterans Family Advocate Commissioner - Annabelle Wilson



Mine is a family that slips through the cracks, so I'm passionate about creating systems that truly support our people.

I can still close my eyes and picture the first time I saw Flight Lieutenant Ianthe O'Brien. It was at a party on the Air Force base in Williams, New South Wales.

He was kind, trustworthy, magnetic and kind, the epitome of what the military aims to produce. On Anzac Day in 2006, at the age of 22, Iain returned from his first deployment to Afghanistan. Less than 2 months later, he was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour and given 18 months to live - if he was lucky. Iain and I had 10 magnificent years together, and he passed away at 32 on Saturday the 26th of November 2021. Two and a half months later, on the 13th of February, we little baby girl Phoebe was born. The doctors delivered with her head.

As I often the case with the family, once my veteran was gone, Iain like I was cut off, and the family, I was left to try and navigate the "veteran machine" by myself, and it was an example of a family that, in this day, still slips through the cracks and receives no DVA support. I was 26, alone, and with a newborn baby. I couldn't understand why nobody would help me. I became lost and suicidal thoughts began to dip in. I stopped eating, I stopped sleeping, I was exhausted, and I was scared.

Then, two things happened. First, a friend brought me along to see local RSL with her son, a little single female Victorian veteran in East Melbourne - and I had a quiet heart with the help there, who welcomed me like a sister. And second, another friend, who also happened to be a Legation, introduced me to Legation.

Visiting the Western Australian gold of Australia that makes

What has resulted in 8 years of me volunteering and working across the ex-service space, helping families just like mine, because there is so much to do. I have had a career built on advocacy, lobbying and policy influence at every level of government, for multiple reasons - and I see that those skills were needed in the veteran family space.

I have held positions on several boards and committees, including in my local RSL, with Branch and the Institute of Veterans' Advocacy. For the last 4 years, I have worked as a National Legation and currently as the Chief Operating Officer. In my previous role of the service delivery model I had a hand in building them, including working on long-term funding needed for the ongoing stability for this service, which supported more than 1,000 families. This was funding that I had to find in the philanthropic space, as there was nothing within government and DVA to support this type of work.

During my time in this community, I have seen many other families around me who are slipping through the cracks too. Many have been through things that I will never experience. Many have been through things worse than what I have experienced. Their stories deserve to be heard and supported.

The Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner serves as the bridge between lived experience and government policy. And this is why I took the job. I'm passionate about creating systems that truly support our people - removing barriers, influencing systems change, and hopefully, keeping this community a little better than I found it.

I came into this role with a very close idea of what I wanted to achieve, and I was very confident for me to be able to verify that I was on the right track at the 2025 Veterans Families Forum, which was held in my first few weeks in the job. I've enjoyed all of these moments on the table of strength. Plus, nothing else will take to achieve for Australia's veterans.

community in my tenure as the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner.

- **Equity of Eligibility and Access** which ensures getting as far as the start. Presumptive liability will support more families to access support, and an understanding of ex-patriates, career and diverse family structures will make sure the Department is successfully recognizing and reaching the community that we have within.
- **Charity and Improvement of DVA Services and Support for Families** which will mean that the programs and supports for families are fit-for-purpose and continuously improve.
- **Enhancement of DVA Partnership and Support** which is about discovering how the Department can better support our DVA community to be sustainable and safe.
- **Build Life Foundations and Culture Belonging** which includes prevention, support, training and education for families, and support to rebuild and move forward with their lives.

I see this as a "living plan" - one that I will not and should not go. There is a commitment to get out and about as much as I can. The engagement part of this job is incredibly important to me, because not only are the families in this community my peers, but I want to continue to be an informed as possible throughout my tenure. I want to hear the quiet voices. The ones we haven't heard yet.

And so, as we round out 2025, and move into 2026 (and beyond), I see us in the future beautiful families who also live alongside me within this community. Please speak up. By speaking up about your experiences, you're showing the Department where the gaps are. We are a community of people who are constantly being told that we are the anomaly, but we are the majority. And we are and this role. I've been to see this online to help you see what it's like for the barriers are, and support you with advocating for change for you, and others just like you.

Here's to change. On we march.



December 2025 Veterans Families Forum



OFFICIAL

THE HON MATT KEOGH MP
MINISTER FOR VETERANS' AFFAIRS
MINISTER FOR DEFENCE PERSONNEL

MEDIA RELEASE

20 November 2025

FUNDING FOR VETERAN WELLBEING PROJECTS

A key focus of the Albanese Government is enhancing the wellbeing of veterans and families of veterans. Applications are now open for the 2025-26 Veteran Wellbeing Grants (VWG) Program, a \$5.8 million program to support ex-service organisations and community groups undertake tailored, **ex-service** activities that focus on the wellbeing of the veteran community.

The Program is designed to support a huge range of creative pursuits, group bonding activities and peer support, recognising the breadth of interests and needs among our veteran community. Small grants of up to \$50,000 and large grants of up to \$200,000 are available to support community projects that strengthen social connection or promote the physical and mental health of veterans and families of veterans.

Organisations selected for funding in past rounds have demonstrated a strong understanding of the challenges faced by veterans and families and are delivering wellbeing support services and activities which meet the needs of their local community.

Whether you've got an innovative idea or a tried and tested program, if you're an organisation looking to make a real difference in the veteran community, support is available through the VWG Program to help you on your way.

To learn more or apply for 2025-26 VWG Program, visit www.dva.gov.au/VWG. Applications close on 2 February 2026.

MEDIA CONTACT:
DVA Media: media.team@dva.gov.au

Focus Area #3

Enhancement of ESO Partnerships and Supports

**Royal Commission
Recommendations targeted**

89 118 119 121

**Defence and veteran families
wellbeing strategy actions targeted**

1.2.2 3.3.1

2025 Outcomes

Progressed collaborative work with IVA and RSL to strengthen the advocate workforce, including through formal engagement and shared planning. This work is helping build momentum towards a more supported, professional and sustainable advocacy sector, with wellbeing advocates emerging as an important tool for families.

By joining the Research and Evaluation Board, we strengthened strategic oversight of veteran-related research and pushed for a more coherent national focus. This ensures research investment is aligned with community needs and can meaningfully influence service design and policy.

Advocated for Legacy to broaden eligibility criteria to better reflect contemporary service and recognise contribution rather than incapacity. This supports a more inclusive approach that honours service, strengthens family support options, and aligns with modern expectations of fairness in the veteran support system.

Participated in the first nationwide meeting of RSL State Branch CEOs, including sharing my priorities and plans directly with senior leadership, and developing an understanding of their plans and priorities.

This engagement sets the scene for a strong and collaborative ongoing working relationship, and we have made the commitment to continue to meet in this way, as working together influences thinking across the organisation, supporting stronger national alignment and greater momentum for change.



Every day we speak to veterans and their family members across the country who have served in the military, who have received assistance from IVA, and who have sought assistance from IVA. Many of these people receive invaluable service, and who have sought assistance from IVA advocates, who guide our community through assistance from Ex-servicemen's organisations (ESOs) and care.

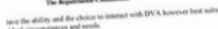
While we will continue to put pressure on the Government and the Department to simplify the system, making it easier for veterans and families to submit their own claims, we also acknowledge the role of the veteran advocate is central to Australia's veteran support system. Apart from supporting veterans and their families throughout the claims process, ESO advocates also provide valuable connections to broader supports and services in the wider community as well as the resolution of the outcome of the claim.

We are proud of the majority of advocates who operate with integrity and thank them for their commitment and their families.

[illegible]

We remind our community that paying for advocacy services does not guarantee faster processing times, better claim outcomes, or higher compensation payments. All claims follow the same path in accordance with the relevant legislation, regardless of whether they are lodged by a paid advocate, a free advocate, or by the claimant themselves. If you choose to pay for an advocate, please be cautious of anyone promising a large payout or faster service pay for an advocate. A phrase we often hear is "pay for an advocate."

You do not need to give away part of the support that you or your family are entitled to, as a result of your service to our country. We will continue to use all the premiums available to us



have a national professional association for veterans' advocates, the VA Advocacy will provide leadership and support to the sector and set training standards for all advocates. The Institute will also be responsible for

ness to free advocacy services by trained, professional advocates in
SDs. Visit the [Advocacy Register](#) to find an advocate near you.

continuing to work with DVA, our veteran advocates and the ESO
 guard the integrity of the veteran advocacy system, to ensure Veterans
 in quality assurance from people who have their best interests at heart.

— *all*

Annabelle Wilson
Newman Family Advocate Commissioner



Dear Mr. McNeil,

Thank you for your letter of 5 November about the changes to Legacy's eligibility criteria. Congratulations on this important and long-awaited step for Legacy. Expanding support to all families, regardless of whether their veteran has seen operational service, is a compassionate and forward-looking move. As you know, this is something the Veterans Family Advocate Commission has long supported, including during her time with Legacy, so it's wonderful to see this milestone reached.

Legacy has always been a place where families can find support and resources, and we're

Legacy has always been a leader in this space, showing courage and initiative in supporting the veteran community. So, while we commend Legacy's decision to align with the Department of Veterans' Affairs definitions, we encourage you to continue to lead the way by including reservists who have not served continuously in an active-duty definition of a family, which includes:

We're also keen to understand how Legacy plans to communicate these eligibility changes, particularly with families who have previously reached out but were not eligible. Could you please share the updated eligibility criteria and any communication materials you have planned? Please email 774.261.4446. Our offices can visit you if you have communicating it through our network.

Once again, congratulations. This change has been a long time coming and will make a real difference in the lives of veterans' families.

Kind regards,

Calvin Fegan (PSC) 434

Annabelle Wilson
Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner

11 November 2025

Focus Area #4

Build Life Foundations and Cultivate Belonging

**Royal Commission
Recommendations targeted**



**Defence and veteran families
wellbeing strategy actions targeted**



2025 Outcomes

Purchased and delivered curated library packs to community hubs, featuring high-quality children's books written exclusively by defence and veteran spouses. This initiative promotes recognition and familiarity across the hubs network, ensures hubs have the right resources for children's spaces, and supports small businesses and community leaders within the veteran family network.

Participated in the international Knowledge Exchange Event, "Policies and practices to strengthen targeted support to veterans and their families in Ukraine" by sharing how Australia supports veteran families through the Veteran Family Commissioner role, and just as importantly, by reflecting on what we could have done better and the lessons we are still learning. As Ukraine develops new support systems for veterans and their families, the OECD organised this event to help Ukrainian practitioners draw on global experience. It was also an invaluable chance for me to learn from the approaches of countries such as Canada, France, Ukraine and the United Kingdom across policy, service delivery, and mental and physical health supports.



