



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

transforming
DVA

VETERAN FAMILIES FORUM

2025



Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Veterans' Affairs acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We recognise and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of Australia and their continuing spiritual and cultural connection to land, sea and community.

The Forum took place on the beautiful lands of the Yuggera and Turrbal people.

Acknowledgement of Service and Sacrifice

We respect and give thanks to all who have served in the Australian Defence Force and the loved ones that support them.

We acknowledge the unique nature of military life and thank veterans and veteran families for their sacrifices in service of our nation.

We acknowledge the deep value of lived experience and express our gratitude to the participants of the Veteran Families Forum for generously sharing their insights.



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Introduction

What is the Veteran Families Forum?

The Forum is a two-day workshop that brings people with lived experience together to collaborate with each other, and shape improvements to the way we support veterans and families of veterans.

How is the Forum run?

The Forum is highly interactive and is grounded in a co-design approach that recognises veteran family members as the experts of their needs and collaborators on designing improvements and solutions.

Co-design is anchored in valuing lived experience and creating an inclusive space for differing opinions, perspectives, and ideas to be explored in a respectful and solutions-focused environment.

Who attends?

The people invited to the Forum are there to participate, not to listen; so we call the people that come to our Forums 'participants' rather than 'attendees'.

The participant list is refreshed annually via a publicly promoted Expression of Interest (EOI) process. We invite humans, not organisations and the most important criterion is that the person has lived experience of being part of a veteran family.

The 2025 participants were the most representative group we've ever had. The 31 participants that came from every state and territory included:

- Women, men and nonbinary people.
- First Nations people.
- LGBTQ+ people.
- A diversity of roles in a veteran family.

A note on gender diversity

The Forum was originally titled the 'Female Veterans and Veteran Families Forum' and was a women-only engagement. In 2023, participants told us it would be better if we split this up to engage veterans, and families of veterans separately, so we did. We now have the Women Veterans Forum, and the Veteran Families Forum.

One of the great things about this split is that people of any gender can now participate in the Veteran Families Forum, not just women.

We're working on increasing the gender diversity of the Forum and know we still have work to do. Having said that, we're proud to share that we are making progress. In 2025:

- 1 in 6 participants were men - the highest percentage to-date.
 - Non-binary participants took part in the Forum for the first time, at a ratio of 1:15.
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About this report

Plain language

This report uses plain language to share information in a way that is easy for everyone to understand.

Direct quotes

Participants often word things much better than we can, so when we want to tell you exactly what they said we have used quotation marks and italics.

Summarising

Everything else in this report is our way of telling you the key parts of what we heard in a 'long story short' kind of way.

Distribution

Reporting with extra details have been shared with the teams that will be working on bringing the improvements and ideas to life.

Structure of the Forum

The Forum is held over two days, with different sessions on a variety of subjects.

For 2025, the five key topics were:

1. **Defence Family Advocate** – exploring what 'family' looks like today, and bold ideas for the future.
2. **Veteran Family Commissioner** – prioritising key action areas that will shape her 5-year plan.
3. **Research** – identifying topic areas for research, and what researchers should keep in mind.
4. **Rehabilitation programs** – improving the way rehabilitation involves families in the process.
5. **Open Arms** – reviewing the Model of Care and looking at how this can be improved.

The two days of engagement led to the **highlight of the Forum – the Presentation Panel**.

After an hour of preparation time, participants presented a summary of their insights, feedback and ideas directly to a panel of DVA leaders, and the Defence Family Advocate.

As the 4 presentations reflect what each group most wanted to share, those presentations are the first section of the report.

After that part, we'll share what we heard from each of the 5 sessions.

Children of Veterans

The children of veterans group shared powerful and moving reflections with the panel. They described the unseen impacts of constant relocations, disrupted education, and the emotional toll of parental trauma. One presenter noted that, at 26, this Forum was the first time they had met someone who truly shared their experience, highlighting *'how lonely, incredibly lonely, this experience can be'*.

While often labelled resilient, they stressed that resilience does not erase instability or loss.

They called for three key reforms:

- **A formal advocate role** to ensure the experiences of children of veterans are represented in senior decision-making and to remove barriers to support programs.
- **A national peer mentoring program** connecting Defence and veteran children with others who share similar lived experience.
- **Parenting programs for returning veterans;** to support healthy family dynamics to ease reintegration.

'No one up above is telling our stories, is advocating for us, is saying, you know, our kids are being uprooted. They need this...' Participant.

'This is the first time in both of our lives where we've been able to talk to someone outside of our communities ... and say this is my experience as the child of a veteran and to have someone looking back at you and say, yeah, me too.' Participant.

*'When I speak about this life, I don't just speak about the sacrifice in uniform, I speak about the **hidden sacrifices made in silence by children like me who grow up without a stable home, without a steady education, and without parents who are able to be fully present.**'* Participant.



Child of a VETERAN

OUR SILENT STRUGGLE

UPROOTED + UNSTABLE

COURAGE doesn't remove THE SCARS

HIDDEN SACRIFICE 25 YEARS

UNSTABLE HOME

1. REPRESENTATION ADVOCATE
2. PEER MENTORING PROGRAM
3. PARENTING PROGRAMS

The infographic is hand-drawn on a yellow background. It features a central figure of a person with roots, representing a child of a veteran. The text is written in a mix of bold, black, and blue fonts. The solutions are listed in a numbered list at the bottom.

Spouses of Veterans

Spouses of veterans emphasised that while government holds legal and moral obligations to those who serve, current legislation does not recognise the service and sacrifice carried by spouses and families.

They described the ongoing strain of repeated relocations, disrupted careers, financial insecurity, and the complex impacts of service-related trauma, all while often being excluded from key communication channels. Spouses noted that even when Australian Public Service (APS) processes acknowledge Defence spouses, this rarely translates into meaningful employment pathways due to the repeated need to move location, making stable careers difficult. Their proposals included:

- **Legislative reform** to formally recognise spouses and families in definitions, entitlements and service-related obligations.
- **Direct inclusion in communication and information pathways**, supported by accessible information sessions and resource libraries.
- **Stronger employment, wellbeing and community supports**, including practical APS employment pathways for relocating spouses, high-quality services across ESOs, and access to diverse wellbeing programs for the whole family.

Spouse of a VETERAN

NO RECOGNITION
of the SERVICE
of SPOUSES



SPOUSES ENSHRINED
in the legislation

1. REVIEW
DEFINITIONS

fighting for the
THINGS we NEED



2. SPOUSES GET
COMMUNICATION

3. INFO SESSIONS
AND ACCESS

'The spouses really are the ones who can actually drive the change, drive the way that the system within the family works.' Participant.

'We manage the logistics, the emotions, the transitions. Yet we're invisible in the system.' Participant.



Parents of Veterans

Parents of veterans spoke with pride about their children's service, while highlighting the challenges families face, particularly the sudden separation that occurs when a young person enlists, often with little guidance for parents unfamiliar with Defence culture. Many came from multi-generational Defence backgrounds and noted that although cultural change is underway, support remains inconsistent.

Parents identified gaps in communication, cultural understanding, family inclusion and visibility at key milestones such as enlistment and retirement ceremonies. They stressed that early engagement with families could shape healthier experiences across generations. Their proposals included:

- **Stronger family inclusion at enlistment, training and milestones**, including clearer communication, consistent Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS) presence, meaningful engagement at ceremonies and improvements to enlistment and retirement events.
- **Better support for culturally diverse families**, with accessible explanations of Defence culture, expectations and pathways.
- **Expanded education, wellbeing and community supports**, such as online study access, fee-free courses for families, state-level forums and celebrating positive Defence stories.
- **Procedural fairness** for veterans and families when administrative decisions or discharge processes go wrong, ensuring transparent and equitable treatment.

'Initial training, you're cut off...with your child for up to four weeks before you have any sort of knowing that they're okay.' Participant.

'We've served across generations. It's time the system recognised the ripple effect on our families.' Participant.



Parent of a VETERAN

INTER GENERATIONAL HAMSTER WHEEL

INFO MORNING TEA

PROUD

CHALLENGES:

CULTURAL BARRIERS

ISOLATION & CONNECTIVITY

1. CLEAR COMMS
2. CELEBRATING WINS
3. STATE-LEVEL forums
4. PROCEDURAL fairness

Supporters of Veterans

The 'wild card' group addressed the experiences and needs of people who support veterans but sit outside formal policy categories, highlighting how many feel unseen, unsupported and constrained by rigid, time-bound rules. The group worked with the visual scribe to illustrate some of the roles that are often 'supporters of veterans'.



They emphasised vulnerability among carers, ex-partners, and culturally diverse families, particularly as ageing carers face long-term insecurity without superannuation or savings.

They stressed that real lives don't fit neatly into policy boxes and warned that without change, future generations will face the same crises. They called for:

- **Flexible, inclusive policy settings** that do not rely on strict timelines, especially for carers and ex-spouses.
- **Recognition of carer vulnerabilities**, particularly for aged carers who face financial insecurity and separation within the aged-care system.
- **Meaningful recognition and safe engagement** for those who support veterans but lack formal entitlements.
- **Stronger cultural understanding and clearer communication** for diverse families across Defence and veteran systems.

'We need solutions outside of the box and we continue to do the same thing over and over...again, and we're trying to expect different results...' Participant.

'We need meaningful engagement. We need recognition. We need safety.' Participant.

Defence Family Advocate session

This session highlighted that the 'traditional' nuclear family unit is not reflective of what veteran families look like today. Participants talked about:

"Family – Friends who are the family we choose"

When you leave your support networks to move somewhere new, the friends you make in the new location often are the ones that help fill in the gaps. Defence life creates a reliance on having a strong community to help out when the veteran is deployed.

'My closest Defence friends are still in our lives today. Our children call them Auntie. That's our biggest support network.' Participant.

'Family are the ones who say, "how can we help?"' Participant.

Cultural perspectives

The structure of family is different in First Nations communities, acknowledging a much broader set of kinship connections.

'Most of the Jarjams [young people] I spoke with don't have traditional families. They were raised by uncles, aunties and grandparents... For us, family is choice.' Participant.

Parents filling in the gaps

Parents step in to assist but are not entitled to support because they are not considered to be 'dependents'.

'Partner deploying, so need my parents to fly in to help care for my children.' Participant.

'My parents help us move, settle the kids, unpack... but they don't get any financial support.' Participant.

Shifting dynamics

The nature of Defence life impacts the family dynamics and responsibilities of different family members.

'My dad came home a different person. My mum struggled with mental health. I had to raise myself and my sister.' Participant.

'My husband was prevented by Defence to see his father who had terminal cancer. Greatly impacted him, me and our relationship with Defence. I have also found it hard not to be able to support ageing parents.'

Participant.

Next of Kin

The current systems and policies are rigid and reflect an outdated family structure that is not indicative of a more dynamic and fluid nature of contemporary families. This is particularly challenging for Next of Kin.

'There's no box to tick for kinship on DVA forms. We need to open up definitions to support those who are actually supporting the member.' Participant.

'Paperwork around 'next of kin' – if you only have parents and they are divorced; you can only choose one. If you are an ex-spouse, similar.' Participant.

'My ex-husband's next of kin is now his mother. I am custodian of our children, so there's a challenge there.'

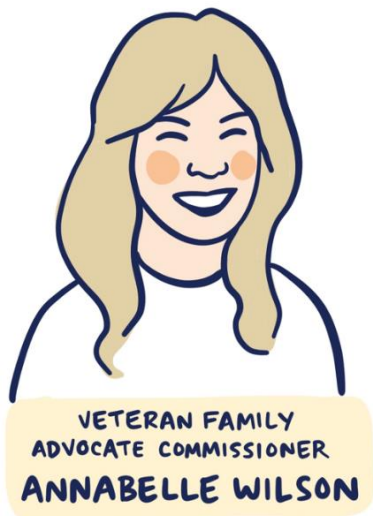
Participant.

'[When a veteran passes away] there may be a spouse, or veteran's parents that did not get along...challenges are here with notification [of death].' Participant.

Veteran Family Commissioner session

The new Veteran Family Commissioner, Annabelle Wilson, had just started her 5-year term, so the Forum was a great chance to share decision making, by asking Veteran Family members what matters most to them.

She shared the 10 action areas that she's planning to focus on and asked for input on these.



- 1 Family Focus in the Wellbeing Agency
- 2 Presumptive liability reform
- 3 Understand and support Veteran children
- 4 Improved communication with families
- 5 Engage and support ESO growth
- 6 Support for Carers
- 7 Continuous program improvement
- 8 Family and Domestic Violence response
- 9 Postvention and Bereavement support
- 10 Research and data for families

Through a voting activity with labelled jars and tokens, the top priorities for Veteran Families are:



Because the tokens were colour-coded, we can see which topics matter most to different family members.

Parents of veteran	Wellbeing agency • Presumptive Liability • Support Children • Support Carers
Spouse – Defence	Wellbeing agency • Support Children • Research and Data • Communication
Spouse – Veteran	Support Carers • Communication • Support Children
Child of veteran	Support Children • Support Carers • Engage ESOs • Research and Data
Sibling of veteran	Support Carers • Research and Data • Wellbeing agency
Ex-spouse of veteran	Research and Data • Support Carers • Engage ESOs • Wellbeing agency
Widow of veteran	Presumptive Liability • Postvention • Address FDV • Support Carers • Engage ESOs

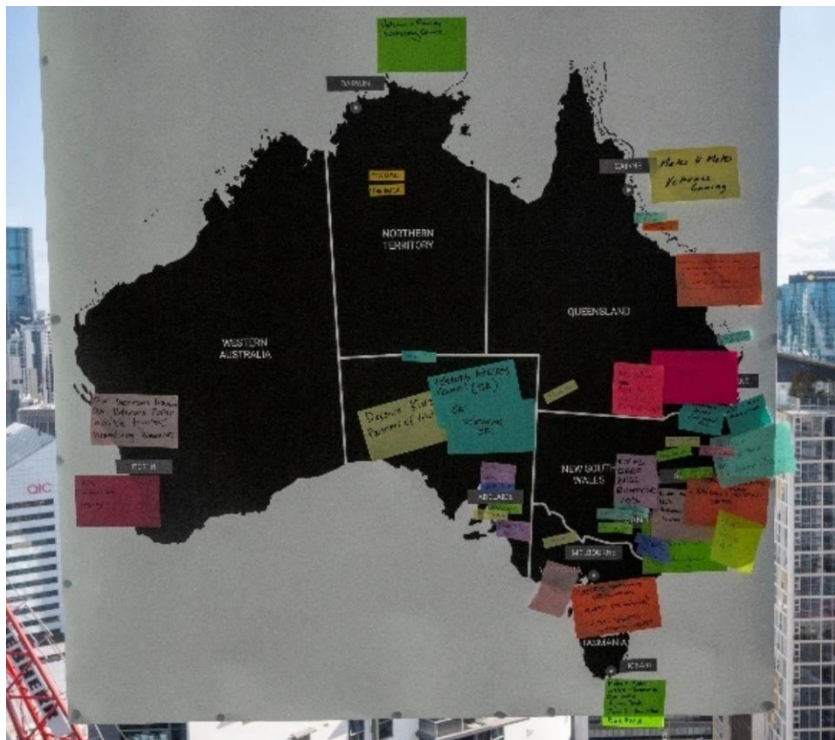


It's important to flag that most participants at the Forum haven't lost their veteran loved one, so the priority level of 'postvention and bereavement support' can't be fairly decided by this group. To understand the level of priority, the Veteran Family Commissioner will need to ask family members who have lived experience of losing a veteran they love.

We also wanted to know which organisations are helping families.

We printed out a large map of Australia and asked the family members to write down the organisations they go to for support and put them on the map.

While you can see a lot of colour, it's not all rainbows – some participants said they felt unsupported in Victoria, and one person told us there was *'nothing for veterans or contemporary families in Queensland'*.



Research session

This session focused on the recently announced **Veteran and Family Learning and Innovation Network (VFLINK)**. VFLINK is a \$25 million, five-year partnership between DVA and Phoenix Australia.

We asked Forum participants for their input, before starting on the research – because it's important to make sure that we're focussing our efforts on the things that veteran families care most about.

What kind of research do you want us to do?

Participants called for research that:

- Follows families over time.
- Looks at whole of community impacts.
- Comparative research that can be used for benchmarking.

Research should look at:

- The impact of Defence life on children and young people, such as education gaps.
- The financial, career, and wellbeing disadvantages spouses face.
- The effects of trauma on family dynamics, and the wellbeing toll on carers.
- Salutogenic (positive health) factors.
- Where there are data gaps, and how systems change can support visibility of veteran families.

How should the research be done?

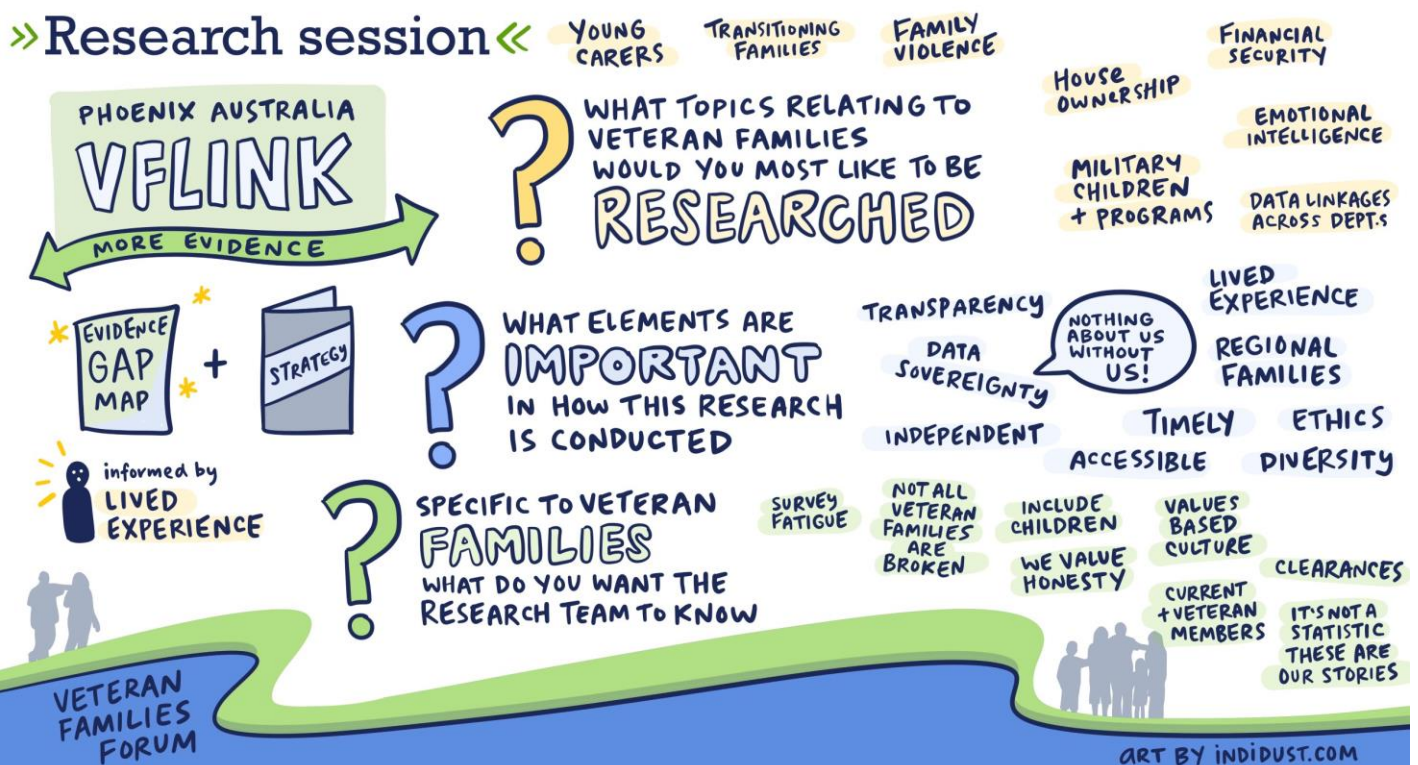
Participants called for research to be done in a way that is:

- Ethical – guided by strong ethical standards, with data sovereignty and privacy as a priority.
 - Transparent – methods, data and results should be shared openly, regardless of outcome.
 - Inclusive – veteran families are really diverse, so a broad spectrum of lived experience is key.
 - Accessible – using various platforms and methods to reach different groups.
 - Fair – value lived experience by paying people for their involvement.
 - Direct – the voices of children of veterans should be included directly, not just via the parent/carer.
 - Meaningful – research should be practical, and lead to real-world improvements.
 - Collaborative – veteran families should be involved in the design of research.
-

What should the researchers know about veteran families?

The participants said it best. All of these are direct, word-for-word quotes:

- *'We have been invisible for a long time. Please don't assume that (past) research has been done properly, in-depth and in a nuanced way.'*
- *'We may be frustrated but we want things to be better, **don't be put off by initial frustration.**'*
- *'We have an intimate knowledge of how systems are REALLY working. **We're often the experts.**'*
- *'Target or seek out underrepresented groups directly, these **people may not be the first to put their hand up**, but they are out there and need to be included.'*
- *'Service has direct impacts on families (**not just vicarious via the veteran**).'*
- *'Families do not only exist to improve the life of the veteran. **They have their own needs and goals**'.*
- *'Don't allow **empathy and compassion** to leave the room over policy and to do lists.'*
- *'Behind the data is a story – veterans (and veteran families) are trained to "be quiet" so **be patient.**'*
- *'We are **burnt out by telling our story and seeing no action** - close the loop!'*
- *'We need to see how the research will be **translated into real world outcomes.**'*



Rehabilitation session

This session focused on improving rehabilitation services. Participants shared clear and consistent advice:

- Early and ongoing engagement is needed. Building awareness of the available supports **before they're needed**, is key.
- When a veteran is overwhelmed is when support is most needed and is also when communication breaks down. The ability **to engage the family directly** is a key success factor.
- Support families to support veterans, by **providing tools and guidance** so they can ask the right questions and be effective advocates during rehabilitation.
- Choice and flexibility are important. Allowing the veteran and family to **engage with rehabilitation at the time** it will be **meaningful for them** is important and should not be limited to arbitrary timeframes.
- Providers should be equipped with **the right capabilities and mindset** to engage with veterans and veteran families effectively. Staff with lived experience is the gold standard, but at minimum staff need to be empathetic, accountable and considerate.

The top request from families:

Ensure families are invited to rehabilitation planning meetings. To help make sure this happens, add a field to the rehabilitation intake forms to identify a support person (not just next of kin).

In cases where a support person is not identified or able to be engaged, provide physical materials (not just digital or email) for veterans to take home so families can understand, reference, and use to prompt conversations if needed.

'If you give them something physical to take home... that we can then access the information to see what the program is, what it's about. So then we can have those conversations.' Participant.



Open Arms

The Open Arms session highlighted the importance of knowing what support is available, who is eligible for services, and being able to access help when you need it.

With a focus on the Model of Care, participants shared feedback directly with senior leaders of Open Arms that included the following:

- Clarify eligibility within the Model of Care and provide specialist services for children.
- Clarify expected wait times and offer alternative options where longer wait times apply (like telehealth or peer support).
- Improve service coverage and resourcing, noting this is tricky when there aren't enough mental health professionals across the country to support the demand.
- Create resources that support parents to help their families.
- Provide information about Open Arms' work on creating bereavement and postvention programs.
- Peer support is helpful, and this should remain as a feature of Open Arms services.
- Provide information that is relevant to regional and rural service delivery and continue with recruitment efforts to resource these regions.
- Highlight and communicate the diversity of the lived experience of Open Arms' existing workforce. People from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences work at Open Arms and lots of participants didn't know that.



Final reflections

As the 2025 Veteran Families Forum drew to a close, attendees were invited to share a reflection or an insight about their experience at the Forum.

These have been visually summarised as follows:



DVA officials also shared:

- *'We do our best work when we hear from the people who are directly impacted by what it is we're delivering'*
- *'You've planted seeds today. They may take time to grow, but the seeds are there and without your generosity, without you sharing, we would not have those seeds.'*

Forum evaluation

Each year, we send participants a survey after the Forum to get feedback so we can keep improving.

For example, previous Forum feedback told us the pace is too fast, so this year we slowed down a bit. While 47% of participants said the pace was 'just right'; 23% found it too slow, and 30% found it too fast. We'll keep working on finding the sweet spot.

Feedback was positive overall, with some really helpful suggestions on where improvements can be made. The following are some examples of the things participants told us. These are all direct quotes.

Communication

- *To improve future forums, I recommend clearly outlining the roles and responsibilities of DVA versus Defence at the outset. Some of the concerns raised by participants related more to Defence than DVA.*
- *Some of the language and terminology used completely missed the mark.*
- *I did feel quite out of my depth (imposter syndrome maybe). The use of acronyms and jargon should be revised as it's so hard to understand. Having said that, it was very valuable and very well run.*

Connection

- *More opportunities to connect with other Forum participants would be great.*
- *I wonder if there is a way for the team to provide contact details for participants with each other post forum (this would need privacy considerations covered off of course).*

Dynamics

- *I would have liked to see a bit more shared around the power of putting aside the 'Us and Them' mentality that exists between participants and DVA and more focus on what we can achieve together. This is running in the underground and calling it out might be useful to dropping some more barriers for future events.*
- *The Forum was such an open, thoughtful, and inclusive space. The breadth and balance of participants created a strong foundation for meaningful and actionable change.*

Feeling heard

- *Admittedly forums like this can be hard. Change is slow BUT I really appreciate DVA's willingness to get into the arena and listen to the feedback, hard as it may be. We have many frustrations and hurts to vent, and it can't be easy to be the brunt of that. Thank you.*
- *Thank you for hearing us. I haven't felt seen or heard for a very long time.*
- *I felt that the staff and speakers all listened and made us feel heard.*
- *The organisers took feedback on really well and responded promptly.*
- *Feedback was very well received, respected and prompt action taken where appropriate.*

The future

- *It was encouraging to see DVA leaning into this work in such a collaborative way, to recognise the need for change and the willingness to work in the uncomfortable. I really look forward to seeing how these conversations translate into tangible outcomes!*
 - *This experience has reinforced my confidence that DVA can continue to grow as an organisation that fully and positively supports veterans and their families. Again, heartfelt and personal thanks to the stellar team who organised and hosted it.*
-



The Department of Veterans' Affairs would like to thank the Forum participants for engaging enthusiastically and providing candid and constructive advice. We're grateful for the perspectives, ideas and experiences you shared with us so generously.

