

Veteran Family Commissioner

Submission on the Second Action Plan of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032.

As Veteran Family Commissioner, my focus is on the experiences of families of veterans and the systems they interact with every day. Through that work, I hear a great deal about what helps families of veterans feel supported, connected and safe, and how our systems make those things harder to achieve.

Much of the conversation around family, domestic and sexual violence understandably focuses on prevention, crisis responses, specialist services and recovery. These are all critical. However, there is another aspect that deserves attention.

The systems we build matter.

For many families of veterans, government systems, service systems and support systems are a significant part of daily life. They influence how people access information, how they seek help, how they make decisions and how they navigate periods of vulnerability. When those systems work well, they can strengthen safety and autonomy. When they don't, they can unintentionally create barriers, reinforce power imbalances and contribute to real harm.

This submission focuses on the importance of designing systems that are safe, accessible and responsive to the needs of women, children and families of veterans.

Safety by Design

When we talk about violence, we tend to focus on what happens between people. We spend less time talking about what happens around them.

Yet every person experiencing violence is also interacting with systems. They are navigating services, seeking information, completing forms, accessing payments, supporting children and trying to understand what help is available.

Too often, safety is considered after a system has been designed rather than being built into it from the beginning.

When I meet with families of veterans, I see how administrative decisions can have very real impacts on people's lives. Who receives information. Who can access a service. Who is recognised by a system. Who has visibility of a child's support arrangements. Who is expected to act as the intermediary. This is particularly relevant for families of veterans, who often navigate a combination of mainstream government service alongside Defence and DVA-specific systems. The complexity of interacting with multiple systems can amplify the impact of administrative design choices, making transparency, accessibility and family safety critical considerations.

Over nearly a decade working alongside families of veterans, I've seen children primarily living with the veteran parent, children primarily living with the non-veteran parent, and every shared-care arrangement in between. I've seen step parents raising children, grandparents stepping in, and kinship carers providing connection and support.

Many legislative and policy frameworks continue to reflect assumptions about family structures that no longer align with contemporary Australian society. While these assumptions may simplify legislative drafting, they can also create unintended barriers for individuals and families whose circumstances fall outside traditional models.

For many families, this isn't an issue. Many families of veterans are parenting together, sharing information, making decisions together and doing what's best for their children, regardless of their relationship status.

But I've also seen situations where this is not happening, and where existing systems can unintentionally leave some family members without the information, access, or support they need. I've met with parents who aren't even aware a support or payment exists for them. I've seen situations where access to information sits with only the veteran. And I've seen circumstances where financial security becomes part of the reason somebody feels unable to leave an unhealthy or unsafe relationship.

It is these families that should guide how we think about system design.

Sound public policy requires sufficient flexibility to recognise the diversity of family relationships and caring arrangements that exist in practice. Legislative frameworks that are predicated on a singular or idealised concept of family risk producing inequitable outcomes, limiting access to entitlements and services, and failing to meet their intended policy objectives, sometimes even entrenching harmful power imbalances within families.

When information, access and decision-making are concentrated with one person, systems can unintentionally mirror the very dynamics we are seeking to address through our responses to coercive control and family violence.

As governments increasingly recognise coercive control as a precursor and driver of family violence, there is an opportunity to look beyond individual behaviours and consider the systems surrounding families. Administrative processes, information-sharing arrangements and service access mechanisms can sometimes reinforce patterns of dependency, exclusion or control, even when that is not their intention.

Applying a family safety lens to system design can help ensure these structures support autonomy and access to support, rather than inadvertently concentrating power in the hands of one individual.

This is not because systems are designed to create harm. It's because they are often designed without fully considering how people experience them during separation, conflict, coercive control or family violence.

A process that works perfectly well for one family may create very different outcomes for another.

That is why I believe system design itself should be considered part of violence prevention infrastructure. In my experience, the biggest gaps often appear when systems meet real life. Legislative and policy frameworks are often built around assumptions about how families are expected to function, who has responsibility, and how information, care, and decision making happen within a household.

The challenge is that real life rarely follows those assumptions. Families of veterans come in all shapes and sizes, and caring arrangements change all the time. While assumptions can make policy easier to design, they do not always reflect the realities of family life.

If we are serious about ending violence against women and children, we need to think not only about services and interventions, but about the way systems themselves are designed.

Families of veterans are participants in their own right

One of the strongest themes I hear from families of veterans is the desire to be recognised in their own right.

Historically, many veteran-facing systems have quite understandably been built around the veteran. The veteran is often the claimant, the service user or the primary point of contact. However, families of veterans also interact with these systems and are often deeply impacted by the decisions made within them.

Families of veterans should not be seen simply as an extension of the veteran. They have their own experiences, their own support needs and their own relationship with systems that are intended to support wellbeing.

This becomes particularly important where family violence or coercive control is present. Access to information, communication pathways and service navigation are not neutral issues. Information is a form of power. Access is a form of power. The ability to engage independently with services is often a form of safety.

Where appropriate, families of veterans should have clear pathways to access information, seek support and engage with services directly, rather than relying on the veteran to act as the gatekeeper.

Systems that recognise families of veterans in their own right help strengthen autonomy, increase transparency and reduce the likelihood of unintended harm.

Children and Young People

Children are often the least visible people within service systems, despite being profoundly affected by violence, trauma and family instability.

Many children of veterans experience disruption throughout their childhood. Frequent moves, changing schools and shifting support networks can make it harder to build the trusted relationships that often help children feel safe, supported and able to speak up when something is wrong.

Too often, children are viewed solely through the lens of the adults around them. While parents and carers are critical, children also experience systems in their own way.

A child-centred approach means considering how children access support, how their voices are heard and how systems respond to their needs, not only after harm has occurred but from the very beginning.

If we want to improve outcomes for children, we need to design systems that see them, hear them and support them as individuals in their own right.

Recommendations

The Second Action Plan should consider opportunities to:

1. Embed safety-by-design principles into government systems, policies and programs that support veterans and families of veterans.
2. Review administrative processes, communication pathways and information-sharing arrangements through a coercive control and family safety lens.

3. Strengthen independent pathways for partners, carers, parents and families of veterans to access information, support and service navigation in their own right.
4. Recognise family autonomy as a protective factor within the design of veteran-facing services and programs.
5. Ensure children and young people are considered directly in policy and program design and recognised as participants in systems, not solely as dependants of a service user.

Conclusion

When families tell me about their experiences, they rarely talk about a single service, program or interaction. They talk about navigating a system.

They talk about trying to find information, understand entitlements, access support, advocate for their children and make sense of where responsibility sits.

The National Plan rightly focuses on the actions needed to prevent violence and respond when it occurs. Alongside that work, there is an opportunity to ask a broader question: are the systems surrounding families helping or hindering their safety?

Safety is not only a service response. It is also a design responsibility.

Families shouldn't have to become experts in government systems just to find support. They shouldn't have to rely on the veteran to access information that affects their lives or the wellbeing of their children.

The systems surrounding families of veterans should make it easier to find help, easier to understand what's available and easier to stay connected to support when it's needed most.

For me, this is not about pointing the finger at individuals. It's about reducing risk where we can. Sometimes violence prevention is about services and behaviour change. Sometimes it's about looking at the systems around people and asking whether they're helping or making things harder.

When safety is designed into systems from the beginning, those systems become more than a pathway to support. They become part of the prevention effort itself, helping women, children and families of veterans navigate challenging circumstances with greater confidence, autonomy and dignity.