Overview
The Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) is currently undergoing a transformation process designed to put veterans at the centre of everything it does, and to reform and simplify its business processes. Tackling the mental health challenges for veterans and their families is a pillar of this plan. The Government takes veteran mental and social health seriously, and works to ensure that Australian ex-servicemen and women experiencing mental health issues and wellbeing concerns can access the support they need.

DVA continues to build on its understanding of veteran mental health issues and the impact those issues can have on the lives of veterans and their families, including homelessness and suicide. This means DVA must continue to adapt and enhance its policies and programs to ensure it deliver evidence-based, best practice service and support to the community.

Purpose
This document provides a high level summary of actions undertaken in support of the DVA Mental and Social Health Action Plan 2015 and 2016 (the Plan). The Plan is situated within a strategic framework, guided by both the Veteran Mental Health Strategy 2013-2023 and the Social Health Strategy 2015-2023 for the Veteran and Ex-Service Community.

The Plan included objectives from both strategies, recognising that social determinants play an integral role in the overall health and wellbeing of an individual, including their mental health, and vice versa.

The Plan presented six strategic objectives to support and the mental health and social health of veterans, ex-service personnel and their families, with each detailing a range of actions and corresponding milestones. This included specific, time-limited projects and initiatives, as well as an ongoing focus on business as usual activities.

Achievements
Throughout 2015 and 2016, the Department progressed the Plan while continuing to effectively respond to a range of environmental factors. This included implementing Budget initiatives such as expanding access to the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS), increasing access to non-liability mental health care, implementing a new physical and mental health assessment for ex-serving personnel from their general practitioner (GP), and funding a grant to support children of current and former serving members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with a mental health condition.

DVA’s key achievements against each of the six objectives during 2015 and 2016 are presented below.
Deliver Quality Mental Health Care

► Enhance standards of mental health care delivery to ensure best practice, evidence-based treatments.
► Increase access to mental health care services and support.
► Increase early intervention of developing mental health conditions, including initiatives targeted at members transitioning out of the ADF.

During 2015 and 2016, DVA focused on enhancing mental health care delivery standards through:

- An improved purchasing framework model for hospital outpatient programs, ensuring eligible clients have access to a comprehensive range of quality and evidence-based outpatient services.
- Development of Core Service Standards for the Provision of Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment, and a panel of community-based providers that meet these standards available to treat veterans experiencing alcohol and other substance use disorders.
- Development and implementation of the 2015 National Accreditation Standards for Trauma Recovery Programs (ensuring access to quality evidence-based care through DVA-funded Trauma Recovery Programs).

DVA’s focus on increasing early intervention and access to mental health care services and support included:

- On base advisors assisting ADF members transitioning to civilian life, and providing information on services and support accessible through DVA and VVCS. In the 2015-16 financial year, on base advisors received 11,024 enquiries and delivered 250 presentations to various audiences including pre and post-deployment briefs, transition seminars nationally and individual unit briefs on the services and support available through DVA.
- During 2015 and 2016, the Secretary of DVA sent over 4,000 letters to recently separated ADF members, which provided information about the services and support available from DVA and VVCS.

In addition to expanding the accessibility of its service to more client cohorts in 2016, over the period of this report VVCS has also undertaken a range of activities to ensure its services remain evidence based and represent sector best practice, including:

- Accreditation against the National Standards for Mental Health Services (NSMHS), building on the accreditation VVCS held for the previous decade against the Health and Community Service Sector Standards.
- Expanding its foot print to deliver direct client services from 26 locations nationally, including Satellite Centres that enable clients to access a VVCS staff clinician from a location other than a formal VVCS centre.
- Undertaking continuous quality improvement actions to enhance its services, including consideration of clinical practice policy; group program enhancement; review of transition supports; and a review of adverse incident reporting activities.
## Promote Mental and Social Health and Wellbeing, and Foster Healthy Lifestyles

- Use mobile and online technology to provide resources and tools for mental health self-support, building resilience and as an adjunct to treatment.
- Use education and promotional campaigns to enhance mental and social health literacy and uptake of available services.
- Deliver community programs, for individuals and families that foster healthy lifestyle awareness and choices, and build social connections.

Throughout 2015 and 2016, DVA continued to develop its online educational resources and self-help tools to promote wellbeing, assist in the prevention and early identification of mental health issues, and foster healthy lifestyles including:

- Release of the High Res resilience app and website, in March and August 2015 respectively, to help serving and ex-serving ADF members cope better with stress and build resilience.
- DVA relaunched the alcohol management website, *The Right Mix*, to include improved self-help tools, strategies and a new motivational goal-setting component to help people maintain a healthy balance with alcohol.
- DVA used social media to promote its digital self-management support options, including *High Res* and the mental health portal *At Ease*. Social media continued to prove to be an effective way to reach a younger demographic of the ex-service community who may wish to access support online.

VVCS also strengthened its online accessibility and social media presence, augmenting its website ([www.vvcs.gov.au](http://www.vvcs.gov.au)) and Facebook Page with Twitter (@VVCSsupport) and LinkedIn. VVCS also established strategic partnerships with the tri-service Facebook page managers, other Defence and veteran related government and non-government organisations to enable sharing of social media messages and online information.

DVA, and VVCS centres nationally partnered with ex-service and community organisations to hold Veterans’ Health Week annually in October. In 2015, the theme was ‘Mental Wellness’ and approximately 18,000 people attended 230 events across the country. DVA provided $100,000 to support these events. In 2016, approximately 15,000 people attended more than 300 events, and DVA provided $150,000 in support.

DVA delivered the following community programs that foster healthy lifestyles and build social connections for individuals and families:

- Support to 127 day clubs around Australia through Community Support Advisory Services and Veteran and Community Grants.
- The Heart Health program, which achieved a significant increase in enrolments and completion rates during 2015 and 2016. Following an extensive mail-out program, enrolments quadrupled and 1,474 participants completed the program during the year.
Strengthen Capacity of DVA and Health Providers to Support Veteran Mental Health

► Build DVA capacity and capability to deliver effective health and wellbeing policy and programs and to provide best practice support to clients with mental health conditions.
► Expand VVCS service delivery flexibility and reputation as a specialist mental health service.
► Support health providers to deliver effective mental health care to veterans and ex-service personnel.

In 2015 and 2016, the following initiatives were undertaken to build DVA’s capability to deliver effective health and wellbeing policy and programs and to provide best practice support to clients:

- Continued investment in DVA staff training with over 500 staff attending face-to-face training on various topics regarding mental health and wellbeing, such as suicide skills training, accidental counselling and building resilience.
- Implementation of the Coordinated Client Support (CSS) program in February 2016, in which program coordinators provide support to clients either as a single or primary point of contact. In 2015-16, the CCS program commenced the DVA Reconnects Project, which aims to reconnect with DVA clients through the provision of a complex and multiple needs assessment.
- The Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Veterans’ Mental Health met a total of four times in 2015 and 2016, and a summary of meeting outcomes is available on the DVA website.

DVA continued to provide information resources, professional development opportunities and clinical resources for mental health professionals, designed to help facilitate the delivery of quality mental health services to the ex-service community. This included:

- Additional digital resources to support the delivery of quality mental health care:
  - a new mobile app, Operation Life, to support clinicians treating those with suicidal thoughts
  - an updated e-learning program, Understanding the Military Experience
  - a new e-learning program, PTSD Psychological Interventions, designed to increase clinicians’ understanding of evidence-based treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder.
- A roll-out of professional development webinars, in conjunction with the Mental Health Professionals’ Network, commenced in 2016. Over 1,000 online participants took part in each of the first two webinars conducted in 2016, Understanding the Military Experience: From Warrior to Civilian and Responding to and Treating Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: What Works?

VVCS continued to implement initiatives identified through its quality improvement processes and the independent 2014 Functional Review, including:

- Refining client intake - VVCS completed a national trial to identify ways to streamline intake processes and improve initial client contact with the service.
• Increasing effectiveness in provider management – as it upgrades its technological systems, VVCS is working to enhance outreach provider management practices.

• Modernising group programs – VVCS has commenced a project to revitalise its group program suite to meet the needs and expectations of contemporary clients.

Clinical professional development – VVCS continues to support clinician professional development in a range of modalities known to be effective in the treatment of military trauma, including Cognitive Processing Therapy and Prolonged Exposure Therapy.

Focus on Recovery and Increasing Opportunities to Participate

► Provide an effective balance between vocational and psychosocial rehabilitation for clients.
► Reduce stigma surrounding mental health to encourage early help seeking, lessen the impact of mental health problems and support recovery.
► Deliver social health initiatives, in partnership with the veteran and ex-service community.
► Encourage peer support and networking, and provide community-based services.
► Support and engage Indigenous veteran communities.

DVA focused on recovery and increasing opportunities to participate through a number of initiatives in 2015 and 2016 including:

• The Veteran and Community Grants program provided around $2.1M to 122 organisations in the 2015-16 financial year, including community, private and ex-service organisations (ESOs). The funds were used to support activities and services to sustain or enhance health and wellbeing.

• The Veterans Employment Assistance Initiative pilot was undertaken in 2016 to help wounded, injured or ill veterans access employment opportunities as part of their recovery. An evaluation of the pilot is currently being conducted with recommendations to be considered later in 2017.

• The Peer to Peer Support Pilot Program facilitated the recovery of ex-service members with a mental health problem by being matched with peer mentors who have themselves recovered from a mental health condition. The Pilot was conducted by a mental health service in partnership with an ESO. The Pilot was run in Sydney and Townsville during 2015 and 2016 and evaluation continues in 2017.

• Continued efforts to reduce the stigma associated with mental health and encourage early help seeking to provide the best opportunity for recovery. For example, additional promotion of the ADF Post-Discharge Health Assessment, including developing a companion guide to assist GPs in the conduct of the assessment and providing additional information on services and referral pathways for clients.

• The Indigenous Veterans’ Strategy was launched in January 2015 and included an Indigenous champions program to engage with and support veteran communities. As part of the Government’s Strengthening Mental Health Care in Australia commitment, VVCS will trial the utility of the Synergy digital technology to streamline client access and as an adjunct to clinical services. This trial will assess how the internet-based technology may bring together integrated and interoperable applications, e-mental health tools and other resources to help clients more effectively manage their mental health.
DVA continued to strengthen its strategic partnerships with a number of agencies and organisations during the reporting period. Some of the key actions were:

- The review and re-signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Defence (Defence) for the Cooperative Delivery of Care and Support on 30 June 2016. This agreement’s subordinate documents reaffirm VVCS’ clinicians as a preferred provider of mental health services to the ADF with the ability to provide continuity of care to both members and their families, whilst in Defence and following transition.

- To progress the Government’s 2016 election commitment to create a better transition process for veterans, DVA, Defence and the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation established a Transition Taskforce under the auspices of the Defence/DVA Links Steering Committee. The Taskforce will consult with current and former ADF members, ESOs and other organisations that offer services or support for transition. DVA and Defence staff involved with the policy and administration of transition will also consulted. The feedback and information collected from this consultation will assist the Taskforce in reporting back to portfolio ministers on the barriers to effective transition and providing suggested actions to address these barriers.

- To progress the Government’s 2016 mental health policy, it was announced that Townsville, home to a large serving and ex-serving community, will be one of 12 trial sites for an improved suicide prevention model provided through the Department of Health’s Primary Health Networks. A ministerial round table of stakeholders was held in December 2016. While this initiative is being led by the North Queensland Primary Health Network (NQPHN) and the Department of Health, DVA and VVCS are working closely with these lead agencies to support the development of the trial site.

- VVCS in Townsville is piloting the utility of a Community Coordination and Support Team. This team, comprising a mental health provider and lived experience mental health peer, will work with the veteran community to create stronger links and to facilitate coordinated care. This team is also supporting the Townsville Suicide Prevention Trial being led by the NQPHN.

- Continued delivery of the Men’s Health Peer Education program, with the help of more than 300 volunteers across Australia. Activities included a national workshop in 2015 to set the program strategies for the next two to three years.
The inaugural meeting of the Veterans Ministers’ Roundtable was held on 24-25 November 2016, and involved the relevant Ministers for Veterans’ Affairs from each state and territory. The Ministers discussed transition from the ADF to civilian life, homelessness, incarceration and mental health and agreed to improve coordination on veterans’ issues and data improvement. The Ministers’ Roundtable plans to meet annually.

- Reinvigoration of the Minister’s National Advisory Committee on VVCS which provides independent advice to the Minister on the support provided by VVCS. This committee includes representative of veterans, their partners and mental health professionals. Through a greater focus on co-design and community lived experience, the Committee has supported VVCS’ in setting its strategic agenda and focusing on the role of new and emerging technology.
- Maintaining the partnership between DVA and the veteran and ex-service community through the National Consultation Framework.
- Closer ties with mental health professional associations through DVA and VVCS presentations at professional conferences and editorial content for inclusion in association journals to encourage a wider consideration of veteran mental health matters.

### Build the Evidence Base

- Strengthen reporting and evaluation capability.
- Expand insights into veteran and service personnel health and wellbeing for government, health providers and other stakeholders who support the community.
- Use up-to-date evidence-based research to guide policy development and treatment pathways.
- Capitalise on opportunities to translate research findings into clinical and non-clinical settings, to ensure evidence-based services are provided.

The following DVA research initiatives contributed to building the evidence base for military and veteran health and wellbeing during 2015 and 2016:

- Data collection was completed for the Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme in 2016. The data analysis phase is underway and reports are expected from mid-2017.
- Reports from the following DVA-commissioned research were completed:
  - *The Gulf War follow-up study*
  - *Suicidal behaviour and ideation among military personnel: Australian and international trends*
  - *Veteran mental health workforce capacity analysis*
  - *Systematic reviews of psychological disorder, multisymptom illness and chronic fatigue syndrome in veterans*
- The redevelopment of the Evidence Compass to allow for the expansion of literature reviews to a broader range of topics related to veteran health and wellbeing was completed on 30 June 2016.

The following research projects were commenced during 2016:
• Partnering with Defence and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to determine the prevalence of suicide in current and former ADF populations and comparison to the general community. Preliminary findings were released in late 2016 and ongoing analysis is occurring to help inform policy and program development and improvement in this area.
• VVCS and Phoenix Australia collaboration on a study examining the sustainability of Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) for clients presenting with PTSD symptomology.
• Collaboration with Defence and Phoenix Australia on the National Health and Medical Research Council-funded Rapid Exposure Supporting Trauma Recovery (RESTORE) Trial. This trial is investigating whether an intensive delivery of prolonged exposure therapy, involving 10 sessions over a two-week period, will deliver outcomes which are comparable to the gold standard prolonged exposure treatment protocol.
• VVCS contracted Swinburne University to examine whether online video counselling is as effective as face-to-face counselling.

Looking Forward
There are a number of significant activities occurring in veteran mental health specifically and mental health more broadly, that will help inform DVA’s future focus. These include the Review of suicide and self-harm prevention services available to veterans and ADF members by the National Mental Health Commission, the Senate Inquiry into Suicide by Veterans and Ex-Service Personnel, and the impending release of the Fifth National Mental Health Plan.

Additionally, significant collaborative research efforts between DVA and Defence will progressively release a range of reports during 2017 as part of the Transition and Wellbeing Research Programme that will provide additional findings to help improve understanding and guide investment in issues associated with transitioning from the ADF to civilian life.

2017 presents an opportunity to consolidate and consider the findings and recommendations from the significant range of reviews, inquiries and research currently underway and ensure future focus in this area is evidence-informed, current and relevant. The next Action Plan will be informed by this work.