




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BUDERIM

Record of Proceedings, 27 October 2022

MENTAL HEALTH SELECT COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr MICKELBERG** (Buderim—LNP) (3.12 pm): I rise to speak to the Mental Health Select Committee's report, which addresses opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders. Specifically, today I want to focus on the issue of support for Queensland veterans, serving ADF personnel and their families.

As the Premier highlighted yesterday, Queensland has the largest veteran population in Australia, which is why Queensland should be leading the way when it comes to supporting veterans and their families. The committee report we are debating today briefly touches on the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. Since the select committee report was tabled, the royal commission has published their interim report—a report which, I might say, is refreshingly frank—and deals substantively with many of the issues affecting the veteran community.

First and foremost, among these issues is the abject failure of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to perform the role they were created to deliver. That role is to support veterans. I have made similar comments about DVA in the past. I want to make it clear that my criticism is not one of the current federal government, but rather directly of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, its secretary Liz Cosson and former federal governments of both persuasions, LNP and Labor. All are responsible for presiding over a situation where veterans and their families have had their mental health made worse because of their failures.

Perhaps most significantly, the royal commission report illustrates that the DVA's failures have resulted in veterans' deaths by suicide. Veterans suffering from mental health conditions and at their wit's end are taking their own lives. Veterans deserve better from DVA and governments at all levels. The royal commission interim report highlights the impact on families who support serving and ex-serving ADF members. Submissions to the royal commission described families living with PTSD, domestic violence, limited support from the ADF and DVA, suicidality and helplessness. As the father of four young children and as a veteran who has suffered from PTSD, it was the sections that addressed the impact on children living with a veteran battling mental health challenges which hit home hardest. Submissions talk of families being torn apart, irreparably damaged, and of long-standing trauma that destroyed the whole family. While veterans' issues are typically seen as a federal responsibility, let's not forget that the families of 163,000 veterans who live in Queensland are not supported in any substantive way by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the ADF or the federal government. That is why the state government needs to step up and do more.

I have been critical in the past of the relative focus placed on commemorations and memorials rather than on tangible measures to support veterans and their families. Refurbishing ANZAC Square is great and it is important, but the priority should be on ensuring that veterans and their families get the support they need and the support they deserve. I acknowledge that the state government has taken some initial steps to deliver support to veterans. It is not my intention today to make this a party political issue, but my message is that we need to do more.

Veterans and their families are disproportionately affected by mental health issues. More broadly, they are consistently placed at a disadvantage relative to the rest of the population because of their military service. The families of veterans and serving ADF personnel should not be disadvantaged in relation to their employment, schooling, access to housing or when seeking care in Queensland hospitals—all of which are state government responsibilities. That is the situation that exists now, and these factors directly contribute to the isolation and lack of support that feed the very mental health concerns addressed in the Mental Health Select Committee report.

One idea that has been proposed to tackle some of these issues is for the state government to enact a veterans and veterans' family covenant, which would enshrine a position that veterans and their families not be subjected to disadvantage in the provision and continuity of public services due to their military service. While the former federal government legislated the Australian Defence Veterans' Covenant, it does not go far enough. It too should ensure that a no-disadvantage clause is implemented to tackle some of the systemic challenges that continue to persist right across our society for veterans and their families. Such a proposal has already been legislated by the UK government and municipalities right across the UK.

One area where some progress has been made is in relation to support for veterans during transition to civilian life at the end of their military service. The royal commission identifies this as a particular risk factor in relation to mental health and suicidality. This too is an area where the state government can contribute and make a meaningful difference to the welfare of veterans and their families.

The best monument that politicians can provide for veterans and their families is providing them with the support they need to better deal with some of the challenges that arise from military service. I believe these issues should be above party politics, and I will continue to fight to get more support for veterans and their families. As I have said in the past, I again offer to work with the government to improve the support available for veterans and their families so we can address the mental health challenges affecting the veterans' community.