



The Hon Dan Tehan MP

Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister for Defence Personnel
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Cyber Security
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of ANZAC

Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Mrs Janice Germain
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Dear Mrs Germain

Thank you for your email of 21 July 2017 about the very important issue of suicide in the veteran and ex-service community, and the support that is available to veterans and their families.

I share your concern about the recent tragic suicide death of an ex-serving member of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Suicide is an issue that affects all Australians. It is the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15 to 44, with around 3,000 people dying by suicide every year. Current and former members of the ADF, and their families, are not immune from this and this Government is determined to do all we can to support those at risk in our community.

The 2017-18 Budget delivered more than \$58 million in additional mental health support for serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families, including an expansion of non-liability health care, an expansion of Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) services to families, and two new suicide prevention initiatives to pilot new approaches to supporting vulnerable veterans experiencing mental health concerns.

Suicide prevention, and support to those families who have been affected by the tragedy of suicide, are a very high priority for the Australian Government. This is why in August 2016, the Government tasked the National Mental Health Commission to specifically look at suicide prevention services for current and former members of the ADF, and their families. The review found that there is more that can be done and the Government has committed to action in four key areas.

Firstly, the Government will improve suicide prevention and access to mental health support. It is essential that former ADF members have access to the right kind of mental health support at the right time. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) will now pay for treatment for mental health conditions without the need for the conditions to be accepted as related to service. This is known as non-liability health care and anyone who has served at least one day in the full-time ADF can access free treatment for any mental health condition. Veterans only need to call DVA on 133 254 (metro) or 1800 555 254 (country), or email nlhc@dva.gov.au to seek support.

Available support includes online mental health information and treatment; general practitioner, psychology, psychiatric and social work services; pharmaceuticals; hospital treatment; and services through the VVCS. VVCS provides free and confidential, nation-wide counselling and mental health support to current and former ADF members who have served at least one day. VVCS can be reached 24 hours a day on 1800 011 046.

Secondly, the Government is committed to improving the transition process for ADF members moving from military life into post-service civilian life, which research suggests is a time of risk. The Government has established a joint DVA-Defence taskforce to examine the process, identify barriers to successful transition and provide options to address these barriers. The taskforce is due to report to me shortly.

Thirdly, the Government will improve family support through engagement of families and family sensitive practice. Families make a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of ADF members during and after service. Recognising this, VVCS has a family inclusive approach to address the broader mental health impacts on the family and support positive family functioning. Involving families in the design of DVA and VVCS programs through the DVA Veterans' Families Forum will help to ensure that the support provided meets their needs.

Finally, the Government recognises the need to transform the DVA systems, processes and organisational culture to better respond to the needs of Australia's veterans and their families. To address this, the Government allocated \$166.6 million in the 2017-18 Budget to implement the first stage of the Veteran Centric Reform Program, which will transform DVA's business process and culture, identify and implement government-endorsed best practice service options and continue a targeted ICT redevelopment. The goal of this transformation is to change DVA from an organisation that focuses on claims to one that places veterans and their families at the centre of everything it does. This program represents the most comprehensive upgrade to DVA systems, processes and technology ever undertaken.

The Government is also committed to increasing awareness of how to prevent suicide. Operation *Life* is DVA's suicide awareness strategy, which offers face-to-face and online suicide awareness and prevention resources to the ex-service community. These resources are available from the DVA mental health portal *At Ease* at www.at-ease.dva.gov.au.

The Government is also working to improve our understanding of the incidence of suicide in the serving and ex-serving community. This understanding has been significantly improved by the release on 30 June 2017 of further results from the ongoing Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) study, *Incidence of suicide among serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel 2001-2015*. This study is the most statistically robust data we have ever had on the incidence of suicide in the serving and ex-serving community and it can be found on the AIHW website, www.aihw.gov.au. The Government recognises the importance of building on this evidence base and the study will be updated annually as new data becomes available.

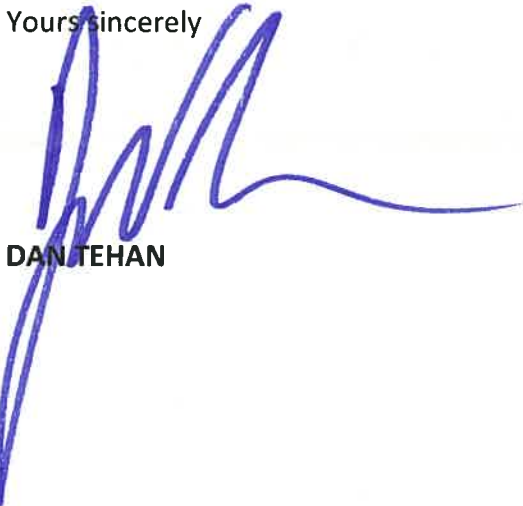
Should you be interested in further information please go to the DVA website, www.dva.gov.au.

In your correspondence you have mentioned a need for regular health assessments. I can advise that DVA regularly reviews all clients who receive household service assistance under the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* (SRCA) and the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004* (MRCA). This is to ensure that DVA has an understanding of the client's current needs and services. It is DVA policy that an Occupational Therapist must conduct an assessment at least every five years to ascertain if the approved services remain appropriate for the client's needs, and if additional services are required.

If Mr Germain would like further information about household services under the SRCA or MRCA, he may contact DVA by email at rnc.brisbane.rehab@dva.gov.au, or by telephone to 1800 555 254, asking for the Brisbane rehabilitation team.

Thank you for your concern about the health and wellbeing of the serving and ex-serving community. I hope this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely



DAN TEHAN