

COVID's effect on the mental health and wellbeing of fellow Tasmanians can be likened to the life-changing impact of leaving the military for veterans when they finish serving their country. Think back to what we experienced through the worst of the COVID pandemic. We were isolated, lost our networks and social connections, and found ourselves in a confusing environment where rules continuously changed. These are similar challenges that many veterans in Tasmania face when they transition from the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Data released from the 2021 Census indicates there are at least 17,500 ADF veterans in Tasmania. The actual number may be as high as 20,000 or more. The number of veterans in Tasmania represents a substantial engagement challenge for the RSL and Ex-services Organisations.

RSL Tasmania had the opportunity to give evidence before The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. We know the current delivery system of veteran services requires urgent repair, and the incidence of veteran suicide is rising. The recent snapshot of specific health and wellbeing data provided by the 2021 census revealed that the percentage of Tasmanian veterans with mental illness, or other long-term health issues, is also higher than the national average. RSL Tasmania took the opportunity to briefly outline a new way to combat the scourge of veteran suicide to the Royal Commission.

Our surveys have identified that Tasmanian veterans want improved access to culturally safe transition and health services, and the main stumbling blocks to achieving mental wellbeing include; the distance to accessing services, hours of service, knowledge of services available, financial and cultural barriers, and a need for 'veteran friendly' services.

Our appearance at the Royal Commission allowed us to outline the *VeteranHub* as a new way to deliver services to all Tasmanian veterans. This model is a 'Hub and Spoke' method of service delivery that plans to co-locate a range of veteran services to reach as many veterans and their families as possible across the island. The lack of frontline services in regional Tasmania often means veterans are referred to specialist Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) facilities on the mainland. This process separates the veteran from their families for treatment and only causes further distress.

Through the *VeteranHub*, we plan to embed a system of early engagement with veterans that provides a continuum of care. The *VeteranHub* will engage veterans in cost-effective, lower-intensity services with high social value aiming to deliver services that help avoid an escalation to mental illnesses and expensive and distressing treatment mechanisms. Providing timely and appropriate therapeutic interventions, lifestyle support programs, and veteran friendly medical treatment will improve the health and wellbeing of veterans and their families, vastly improving their quality of life.

Our end goal is to improve the mental health and wellbeing of veterans in our community and avoid an escalation to mental illness. As an organisation responsible for veteran welfare, we have got to be able to identify, reach out and engage with veterans as they transition from the ADF. Our veterans have served their country with pride, and we must repay their service. *VeteranHub* will deliver local services by local people to local veterans.

John Hardy is CEO of RSL Tasmania