

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 November 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Mr Ivan Slavich, Chief Executive Officer, Soldier On Australia;

Ms Anne Pahl, Manager, Veterans Engagement and Transition, RSL Active,

Mr Jeff Jackson, Manager, Veterans Advocacy and Welfare Support, and

Ms Wendy Bateman, Manager, Aged and Health Support, Returned and Services League of Australia—  
Victorian Branch.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for being here for this very important Inquiry. Before we start I just want to thank each and every one of you for the services you provide for our veterans community. As a former Minister for Veterans I understand the importance of the work you do, so I really appreciate the fact that you are taking the time out today to make submissions yet again. Thank you so much. All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. We can start with Wendy. We will have 5-minute presentations, and then we will proceed to ask questions

**Ms BATEMAN:** I can do an introduction to the RSL. I am Wendy Bateman. I am the Manager of Aged and Health Support in actual fact, which is just changing to health and wellbeing, but we will go with the new title.

The Returned and Services League of Australia was established in 1916. It is the oldest, largest and most representative of the ex-service organisations in Australia, and it is the leading organisation, with a firm focus on current, serving and ex-serving community welfare. The RSL Victorian Branch would firstly like to say thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you and to give some information to this Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers.

In a recent joint submission by the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans Affairs, titled *Transition taskforce: Improving the transition experience*, it quoted that between 5,500 and 6,000 ADF members leave the military each year. Of course we need to understand that not all veterans are troubled by their service, with the majority transitioning from ADF and going on to live healthy and productive lives together with their families. Unfortunately for others, transitioning back into civilian life is a bit more difficult. The most at risk often have mental health conditions that interfere with being able to maintain employment, maintain relationships with their family and friends and also secure housing. The RSL continues to play a role in supporting these veterans, and we will advocate and continue to advocate in the strongest possible way.

The way that we assist the ADF members in the transition from navy, army or RAAF is by providing direct welfare services and ensuring that highly skilled staff assist them and are responsible for administering DVA claims and appeals; providing welfare and wellbeing services that advocate for the best outcomes for the veteran; and developing and delivering meaningful programs that assist veterans in specific areas—for example, the RSL Active program, which offers a range of events and activities for younger veterans to create and develop social networks, enhance social circles and improve mental and physical health outcomes.

The RSL is invited to all ADF transition seminars held in Victoria, and RSL Victoria works with a number of organisations to assist ex-service ADF personnel find civilian employment. It may also cover costs for transition and career services, such as professional CV/résumé writing, training and employment coaching—so basically getting them job ready.

Employment opportunities are another vital component to recovery. A job can improve self-worth as well as providing a steady income. For veterans there is a strong need for employment to be more than just paying the bills. They proudly served their country and as such they often seek employment that is meaningful and beneficial to society. The RSL acknowledges that the Victorian Government is employing veterans in the Victorian public sector program and the success of this initiative, especially around the increased numbers. Unfortunately for some veterans with mental health illnesses, rejoining the workforce is not yet an option and may never be an option for them. Programs to assist these individuals regain self-worth and feel productive are of vital importance to them.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Thank you.

**Mr SLAVICH:** Thank you. Soldier On very much welcomes the opportunity to address this Committee and to help you with the questions that you have posed and help with the transitioning of our veterans. I have only been in the role for a little while, so I have sought briefing from my team associated with the questions you are

going to ask today. So hopefully I can answer your questions adequately but probably not as well as some of my colleagues here on the right, who have been in the industry for a while.

Soldier On has been around for quite a few years now, nowhere near as long as the RSL, but it really came about as a consequence of contemporary veteran John Bale, the founder, feeling that there was a need to really address the needs of contemporary veterans, and essentially the reason why Soldier On exists is that we improve the lives of contemporary veterans and their families. There are four key areas where we provide that service, and we use the acronym HELP.

H is for health and wellness, primarily through the provision of psychological services. There are certainly psychological services that are provided by Open Arms from DVA, and they have got a pretty big budget, but unfortunately there are still some veterans that fall through the cracks, so Soldier On sees itself as being in that space where there are certain veterans that do not fit the category or indeed feel that they need to go to some other organisation in order to meet their needs in that space.

E is for employment, and we have 171 organisations across the country. We are headquartered in Canberra, and we have an office here in Victoria. We pretty much operate in every state and territory, and we are looking also to expand into NT and Tasmania. We have 171 organisations that have signed the Soldier On Pledge, and effectively it is there to help provide a pathway for contemporary veterans and their families to transition into the workforce. We absolutely acknowledge the initiatives of the Victorian Government. We would like to thank the Department of Premier and Cabinet as well. There is some funding that has come through to Soldier On recently which will assist us in providing resources to deliver our services but also more broadly just for the general program that the Victorian Government is putting in place to employ in the public service.

L is for learning, so we have 26 educational institutions that we have signed up with Soldier On to provide recognition of prior learning and also in terms of meeting those skill gaps. We recognise that depends on what sort of activity the veteran was engaged in in the military—obviously if you were a cook, then there is a good chance that you will get a job as a chef, but if you were sitting and firing an artillery gun, there is less chance that you are going to gain employment. It is really assisting those veterans with recognition of that prior learning. A lot of veterans do not understand that there is a lot of stuff that they have done in the military that can be recognised, and we certainly help them in working out what aspects are useful in terms of RPL transitioning into civilian life.

Finally, the P is for participation. So we have a lot of programs that are aimed at social inclusion, social connection—golf days, sailing on Sydney Harbour, learning to play the ukulele. There is lots of stuff that we do in that space. As we have stated previously there are some 6,000 veterans that separate from the military every year. Some do so voluntarily and some do so involuntarily. It is often those ones that separate involuntarily that need more help because they do not have that time to prepare, and they tend to be a bit more vulnerable. I am excited to be part of this role and making a difference. There are a lot of good ex-service organisations around the country, and I think Soldier On is one of them.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you. Jeff or Anne, did you want to say anything?

**Ms PAHL:** No, I think we are fine.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask in terms of the public service jobs that we have announced—and I think the former president David McLachlan was heading up that job to place some veterans into meaningful employment—as I understand it, most of those veterans have a skill set, which I think Ivan just mentioned. A lot of them are joining the police force, which is fantastic, because we are recruiting heavily in the police area anyway. I think we have increased that to about 750, which is fantastic, obviously. In terms of job readiness, a program that State Government can assist with, what can we further do for the returned servicemen and women?

**Mr JACKSON:** As you can see by my role, I tend to come into contact with a lot of these veterans on a daily basis. The issue too is there is still a perception out there of the language. A ‘veteran’ is somebody who has war service or active service. We see people transition out of the ADF; either they get out of their own volition, or they are medically discharged for abuse. They bring a lot of stigma with them, and they do not

regard themselves as veterans. What has happened to them is tragic and it is impacting on their lives. So therefore when they use the term ‘veterans’, some people get alienated from that. So I think we have got to be aware that people transition out of the ADF for all different reasons.

As was said here this morning, a lot of veterans get out on medical discharge. Sadly, the injuries that they have got no longer enable them to serve, so therefore they get immediately linked in to a transition program, which hopefully will reskill them, retrain them and get them ready for life after the ADF, given their injuries. Those who elect to discharge of their own volition, their own request, end up a couple of years after getting out hitting the wall with PTSD, abuse—drugs, alcohol. They are the people that are very difficult to manage because they are not linked in with anybody, so the first thing we need to do is link them in with the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. That will give them an income and that will also link them into rehabilitation. But there is a disincentive there to a certain degree.

An example is: I am working with a 27-year-old veteran. He is not able to work because of mental health issues. He has applied to DVA and he is on incapacity payments, and part of the incapacity payment regime is you are linked in with a rehab provider. You have got to provide a medical certificate saying that you are incapacitated for work, similar to the disability support pension, I suppose. The only trouble is if he was just out in the community looking for work, he would be on Newstart at \$550 for a single man. He gets \$2,200 a fortnight from DVA on incapacity. We see it quite a bit that they are not rushing to get back into work. There is no incentive there. I agree the rehab programs need to be very targeted, and we do not see too many of the veterans that we deal with that are actually close to or even in the near future going back to work. That is one of the difficulties in trying to get these veterans help. As well, we find that when we need to get someone into acute care—and Wendy might be able to answer this better—where they have had a meltdown and they do not have issues accepted by DVA, we try and get them into a clinic, we have to run around town with this veteran to try and get him in somewhere to get him the help that he needs. You might be able to expand on that one.

**Ms BATEMAN:** It is not necessarily where they have not got acceptance through DVA; it is more so when they have actually got a white card for mental health. A couple of examples that we have had over the last 12 months were where we have taken a veteran to an emergency department because they really are having quite a meltdown, to be told, ‘Well, you’ve got a white card; you can go elsewhere’. They did not see that the person actually needs assistance. It was almost like, ‘Well, DVA will pay for a private hospital, so go there’. So some of those things are not quite helpful. But that is a different issue to—

**Mr JACKSON:** Yes. In terms of getting these people back into work too, I think it is important maybe in the workplace to have a mentor—a workplace mentor—somebody who may be ex-service, who can take them on board and just work with them and work with their disability to be able to get them into the workforce. Quite often what I hear is that they have had a clash on the worksite with somebody because their mental health has escalated, and they have just walked off the site and that is the end of that job. And it is very difficult to get jobs, so when you have got one you want to be able to keep it.

**The CHAIR:** Anne, did you want to talk about RSL Active and how that could potentially help veterans come back to work?

**Ms PAHL:** The success of the RSL Active program, now in its fourth year, has seen an emergence of new veterans come into the program from statewide. Our program now is pretty much well embedded within our veteran services program, alongside our advocacy of compensation and our welfare component. We see ourselves probably in the middle of those two key areas. We are seeing veterans now from country regions—success in country regions as far as Warrnambool. I would like to acknowledge Warragul, which is one of our shining lights within the RSL Active program.

I suppose one of the successes of it is that we are now seeing veterans who have either transitioned in a successful transition, who have taken up lives in gainful employment. But we are also seeing the other spectrum of veterans, the veterans who have lived in social isolation, who have been living quite reclusive lives, disconnected from a veteran community—like-minded people that they have been used to—and bringing that connection back together again. It is a way too, with the services that the RSL has got, that we can start linking with other things that we can offer some of these veterans.

The thing is that these veterans now are getting invigorated and they are commencing the program in newer areas, which is seeing it more broadly go out to the states. It is giving them a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging again, which as an ex-service member myself is one of the biggest things. A challenge that you really grapple with once you take the uniform off is that you really feel that disconnect. This is a way of reconnecting again and forming new friendships, so it is a really positive environment, which is great to work in.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** My question is for you, Ivan. You mentioned the HELP model and the 131 organisations that have signed up to the Pledge. Can you expand on what that means and what the Pledge is for those employers—and perhaps a little bit on whether employers are ready and willing to sign up to that, whether they have inhibitions, what are the challenges there.

**Mr SLAVICH:** Yes, thanks for the question. The important thing is that Soldier On is not a recruitment agency. For some organisations it is all about just placing the veteran into a job and gaining the commission from the end organisation. We do not take commissions. We are funded primarily from the public, but we also have some funding from the Victorian Government and there is some promised funding from the Federal Government. So the 171 organisations signed the Pledge. Essentially we have a jobs board. So at the moment there are about 600 jobs that are currently on the jobs board. We recently had an arrangement with BAE Systems, who have pledged a million dollars over the next four years for a program called Serving On, which is essentially to help provide a case manager as a pathway to transition from the military to either BAE or somewhere else.

We have a pathways program. I attended a pathways program up in Brisbane recently. We have a number of organisations—it is nearly like a jobs market where the organisations have a stand and veterans come along. We had over 100 veterans that came along to that event. We run similar events right across every state and territory, and it provides an opportunity for veterans to ask questions, to provide their CV and to discuss employment opportunities. I spoke to an air force sergeant who was really lost in terms of what to do next. We had Virgin Australia there, we had BAE, we had Qantas and we had Boeing, who are also big supporters. He walked out with a big smile on his face because he had a direction and had a real purpose. He had been out of employment for nearly 12 months. So it is important that we provide an individualised, holistic program for veterans. No two veterans are the same. There are certainly similarities, but we provide a tailored solution, helping with their CVs.

The reality is there is also this perception that veterans are broken, and for the vast majority of veterans that is not the case. And you are right: the public's perception is that it is perhaps just those that have served overseas, but plenty of veterans that have served domestically are not broken but do need help in transitioning and recognising that prior learning and being able to transition. We have got 171 employers that have signed up to that program, and we have around 3,000 to 4,000 veterans that are currently using that program.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** The RSL Active program has been very successful in the Warragul area, but what it has done is actually create more work and identify more issues that people need help with. One of them is finding employment. There have been approaches to local government in that area to try and see if we can raise their understanding of the opportunity out there in the community for these retired veterans. What do you think the Victorian Government could do to actually help in that space to actually touch base with employers and raise the awareness of the opportunities that exist for ex-service personnel?

**Ms PAHL:** A very good question; there are many systems in play when you look within the veterans sector. The ADF is a federal system, a state level is the veteran who resides within Victoria and then you have the local council where really that person is actually situated and is where they actually live. We discussed this in regard to what we would think would be really good to advocate. I think you are right: the local councils are really where these veterans are situated. There are many opportunities that we see within a local council environment, whether it be working within the many different departments, such as parks and gardens, within their administration roles and things like that. These veterans are residing in their actual community. Those sorts of targeting employment initiatives within that area making it well-known for the people that are actually there, for the veterans that are actually living there, would be a first step to lead to many other things as well. So I believe that, yes, locally is a really great opportunity and has so much to offer. And it is through us knowing the sub-branches. Of course sub-branches within the 280 that we have scattered through Victoria all live within a council district as well. They are very engaged with the council. I think the sub-branch and the council working

with those particular areas as well provides a very good conduit for these veterans to actually find out about and maybe be employed in those certain areas.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** So perhaps there is an opportunity for the Government to have that discussion with local government—

**Ms PAHL:** I agree.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** and encourage them to grab those opportunities.

**Ms PAHL:** Yes, you are absolutely right. It is the flow-on effect. It is like passing the baton on from the federal system to the state system to the local government system to make sure that flow keeps going.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Ivan, just back on the employers that you mentioned that signed up to that Pledge and that kind of thing, we have talked a lot in this public Inquiry about creating safe spaces, and employers that are committed to taking on people from different backgrounds and maybe disadvantage that they have gone through in their lives. Do you think there is a role for State Government to come in and help break the stigma of taking on veterans? Like you were saying, there is this stigma that they are broken. There are actually ones that are not; they are just looking for an opportunity to get a job. How could we do that?

**Mr SLAVICH:** Yes, it is a good question. Obviously there is the commitment from the Victorian Government with the current program of 750, which I understand has tripled from where the target was before.

**The CHAIR:** It started with 250.

**Mr SLAVICH:** Two hundred and fifty, and it has gone up to 750. So I think that that program is really good in the sense that 750 is a pretty good number when you consider there are 6,000 nationally—that is a very good number for Victoria. It is of course in the public service, though. There are a number of veterans that do not necessarily want to go into the public service, but they do want to go into other industries. A lot of veterans obviously go into that cyber space where they have got security clearance and they get cyber training, and there is a big demand for cyber resources nowadays.

There is a view from my team also that perhaps the higher ranks do quite well in transitioning from the military to civilian life and perhaps it is the lower NCOs and the privates that do not have the same level of success as the commissioned officers and the higher NCO ranks. I think that is possibly one area that you could have a look at. But I think there certainly is more. It is not just the public service. If there is something that the Victorian Government can do to help private enterprise with that transition into the private sector—

**The CHAIR:** The Level Crossing Removal Project obviously is employing a number of veterans as well through construction. So there are other avenues that are happening at the moment as well.

**Mr SLAVICH:** Yes. Clearly the initiative within the Victorian public service is excellent, and the fact that you tripled it is really good. But, yes, if there is anything else that can be provided—

**Ms PAHL:** Can I just add something. Ivan makes a really good point here that there is this perception, which is agreed, that at an officer level they are usually long-term serving and they will transition out well and employment will be there for them after they transition. The recent reports that are coming out from both the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs are seeing that a person who joins the military now will only stay for about seven years. If you are looking at a school leaver at 18 and then you add seven years onto that, we have a population now that are leaving the ADF who are young, who have transitioned from school into the military, who have got significant skill sets that they have gained very, very quickly in that time; however, when you compare that to a school leaver who has gone into university and employment that way, there is a mismatch appearing. It becomes quite confusing for employers out there who have got these people in front of them and are trying to match the skill that has come from one area, plus the age, to someone who has come from the university sector and maybe an internship and followed on from there.

Picking up skills and the language that is used to try to make sure that anyone that is coming out at that particular age is a high-class, suitable candidate that can get gainful employment, whether it be public or private

sector, is still something very, very hard to do. But I would just really like to make the point—and Ivan did it very, very well as well—in regard to having a look now. We must look at the 18 to 30-year-olds. That is what we really should be now looking at and targeting for our employment transition and no longer the people who have done 20 years or more. The man beside me did a lot! I did 11 years full-time, and I know my transition was extremely difficult. However, we must really look at that under-30 component. There is a really good employment market there.

**Mr JACKSON:** All those people who bought poppies—we use that funding for CV development, and we use that for interview techniques for that group that do not get that when they transition because they are under the 12 years service. We also recently had a veteran who wanted to go into the sustainable energy market as a turbine technician. The trouble is, to get a foot in that market you have got to have the ticket or the qualification. We had to put up a sum of money for him to go to Victoria University to get the training to become a turbine technician so he could transition into employment. Now, if there was some other way or some pool of funding that they could access—the DVA would not do it because he is now out of the military; that is not something they would do. Those sorts of jobs—that is where the community is heading now. We have got to reskill them, and we need access to funding. I thank everybody for buying poppies, because that allows us to do that, but I do not think it is sustainable for any ESO into the future to be able to do that.

**Mr SLAVICH:** Linked to that is getting that acknowledgement through recognised prior learning and also the career transition assistance scheme. My understanding is that you have to have 12 years service in order to qualify for that, and so younger veterans who have not got that 12 years do not get that assistance. There is limited understanding amongst veterans about the whole recognised prior learning process. They may think also that what they learned in the military would not be applicable for an RPL qualification, so we help them with that at Soldier On as well. There are also situations where serving personnel, because of security concerns, cannot actually divulge what they did as well. So that actually is challenging too from an RPL perspective.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thanks very much again.

**Witnesses withdrew.**