

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 24 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Natalie Suleyman MP, Minister for Veterans; and

Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria and Engagement,

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Policy and Systems, Fairer Victoria, and

Aaron Coutts, Director, Office for Veterans, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this afternoon and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Veterans the Honourable Natalie Suleyman as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present on the veterans portfolio, including our government's investments through the 2024–25 Victorian state budget and our recent achievements. Before I begin, I again acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on today, and I pay my respects to their elders both past and present. I would also like to acknowledge and thank our veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice.

Visual presentation.

Natalie SULEYMAN: The veterans portfolio is dedicated to enhancing the wellbeing of Victorian veterans and their families, commemorating their service and ensuring they receive the support, resources and connections they require. Veterans are an asset to our state, and we are committed to supporting their successful transition to, and participation in, civil life here in Victoria. Across the veterans portfolio in the past 12 months significant progress has been made in delivering the government's 2022 election commitments, in addition to our ongoing work supporting veterans across important areas including employment, mental health and housing.

The Veterans Card Victoria was launched in July 2023 and is now accessible to anyone who has served or is currently serving in the Australian Defence Force and resides in Victoria. The card provides discounts and benefits to all Victorian veterans in recognition of their service. This is, nationally, a first, and more than 15,400 veterans are now registered for the card. I am very pleased to highlight that the public sector veteran employment strategy reached its target of employing 1500 veterans in the Victorian public sector more than 12 months ahead of schedule, and last month the Premier and I announced an extension of this target to employ a total of 1800 veterans in the public sector by 30 June 2025. I do want to thank Major General McLachlan for all of his work in this space.

A new recognition of prior learning pilot program was launched in partnership with Wodonga TAFE to ensure that veterans entering the civilian workforce have their skills recognised, and the pilot is already showing great outcomes.

We have also delivered upon our promise to re-establish the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize, and I look forward to seeing our group of Victorian students travel over to Gallipoli, Türkiye in July.

We have continued our important engagement with the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide including supporting the former Premier's appearance and evidence at the commission in August 2023. We will continue to collaborate with the Commonwealth government and other states and territories once the royal commission's final report is released later this year.

Of course we continue to deliver a number of grant programs that are supporting the ex-service sector and community groups totalling over \$2 million across 80 projects. Our government has invested significantly in the veterans portfolio, demonstrating our ongoing commitment to commemorating the service of our veterans and of course addressing their ongoing needs. In the four years from 2021–22 to 2024–25 a total of \$65.5 million has been allocated to the veterans portfolio. The 2024–25 Victorian budget supports the continuation of our important work, with an allocation of \$4.9 million over three years. This investment will support the continuation of the veterans capital works program for a further two years. This grant program is highly valued by the veterans sector and funds building works, upgrades and other capital improvements to facilities across Victoria. This supports not-for-profit ex-service organisations, who deliver important services and supports to our veterans, their families and of course local communities.

I would also like to highlight that we are continuing –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. We are going to go straight to Mr O'Brien for the next 8 minutes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and team. Can I go to a question probably for Mr Coutts, I suspect. The question is: what were the one-off costs for the establishment of the Victorian veterans card?

Gerry GOSWELL: One million dollars was allocated to Service Victoria in the first year of the budget package, in last year's state budget, to support the establishment, and that work was led by Mr Coutts and the team in the office of veterans in collaboration with Service Victoria, which is part of the Department of Government Services.

Danny O'BRIEN: Great. That partially answers my next question, Minister, which is that there is a 39 per cent budget cut to the veterans portfolio, \$9.2 million from last year. While the answer is that part of that is the one-off establishment costs for the veterans card, that is a big gap, between \$9.2 million and \$1 million. What are the other programs and projects that are going to be cut because of this budget cut?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you for your question, Mr O'Brien. Firstly, I do reject the premise of your question. I will unpack it for you so we do have correct information in relation to what is being supported and funded for our veterans.

Danny O'BRIEN: The question is: what is not being funded?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Let me unpack it for you. As I said, in the last four years we have allocated more than \$65 million to the veterans portfolio.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, with respect, I did not ask you about the last four years. There is a \$9.2 million budget cut – 39 per cent in your own budget papers. We know that \$1 million of that last year was the set-up cost for the veterans card. That is understood, but what is the difference, the rest of it? What has been cut in programs for veterans?

Natalie SULEYMAN: If I can just go back to it. There is no reduction in services or programs, but let me go back just to talk about some of the programs that concluded. One was the Mount Macedon memorial cross. In the 2022–23 state budget the Victorian government had fixed-term funding of \$810,000 over two years to upgrade the Mount Macedon Memorial Cross Reserve. We are really pleased that we have been able to deliver this funding commitment. We have also upgraded the Newport RSL. Again, this was an election commitment and we were able to fund \$200,000 to support the facility upgrades at Newport RSL sub-branch.

Danny O'BRIEN: That has got us \$1 million, Minister. We have still \$7 million to go.

Natalie SULEYMAN: We continue to fund a few more programs. Just bear with me for a moment so I can talk you through so that you can have a clear understanding that there have been investments provided. Just to talk a little bit about it: in 2024–25 we have seen a \$14.5 million investment into the veterans portfolio. The lower amount that you are referring to is in relation to commitments that we have made for the Vietnam veterans museum. That was \$5 million, and we have had to pause that project – not our commitment. The project has been paused because the Vietnam veterans museum unfortunately has faced some site issues and planning issues. I am in regular contact, and my office is in regular contact, with the Vietnam veterans museum committee, but this is a clear pause while the project repositions, as I said, in response to planning and site issues.

Danny O'BRIEN: But, Minister, are you saying –

Natalie SULEYMAN: We stand committed to funding our commitments for the museum. As I said, I have regular contact with the committee, and I have spoken about the \$1 million in relation to the veterans cards in the first year. We also –

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay, Minister. Can I ask about the Vietnam veterans? So was that actually allocated last year and it has been withdrawn this year?

Natalie SULEYMAN: No, it has not been – it is a pause due to the response.

Danny O'BRIEN: No, but if you are counting it to the \$9 million cut, then it has actually got to have been taken out of the budget. I understand it might be temporary, but that is what I am trying to work out.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Well, it will not appear, but we do have a commitment –

Danny O'BRIEN: No, I understand that.

Natalie SULEYMAN: and the project is ready – the \$5 million will be ready to invest back into the project.

Danny O'BRIEN: It was specifically allocated last year?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Correct. It was part of our commitments.

Danny O'BRIEN: Does that mean it has gone back to Treasury now?

Natalie SULEYMAN: And we have commitments.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is fine.

Natalie SULEYMAN: As I said, we have been working with Treasury and the Vietnam veterans museum. Unfortunately, they are stuck in a very –

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. I have got that.

Natalie SULEYMAN: There are some challenging issues, which I am sure they will iron out in due course.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Minister. That is another issue. You mentioned 15,000 veterans have registered for the card. That is only about 16 per cent of veterans. I wonder whether Ms Goswell could tell us whether there are any initiatives to improve the uptake and perhaps why there is not a performance measure about the uptake of the veterans card.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Look, thank you, Mr O'Brien. This is something that we are really pleased with – the launch of the Veterans Card Victoria. We are really proud of this program. As I said, this is a program that is a first nationally –

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, can I remind you again, I have got limited time. I do not need background on the card.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Well, Mr O'Brien, I think it is really important to note that it is a first initiative.

Danny O'BRIEN: It is all very important, but I do not have much time to get background.

Natalie SULEYMAN: And so far we have seen, in less than 12 months since we launched it in July, 15,400 veterans who have joined online.

Danny O'BRIEN: The question is: what are you doing to get the rest of them or more of them to sign up?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Well, what we want is all members of Parliament and of course our RSLs and organisations across Victoria to really support and provide awareness in their local communities, Mr O'Brien. That is the first thing that you can do, providing awareness.

Danny O'BRIEN: Righto.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I have been, and I know a number of members of Parliament around this table have hosted sessions together with their local RSL –

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I was not actually asking what –

Natalie SULEYMAN: to encourage veterans to join online.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, I was not asking what MPs were doing. Many veterans are naturally in the older age bracket and have asked for it not to be a digital card but a physical card. Will you consider their requests?

Natalie SULEYMAN: I am always open to monitoring and working with our service organisations and veterans, but at the moment we have seen 15,400 veterans join up, and I think it is really important to note that in less than 12 months we have had this sign up from veterans. And there is support. Can I just also note, Mr O'Brien, that our local RSLs and RSL Victoria and other ex-service organisations have been supporting our veterans to join online, so that is really important.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, that is good, but that is not the government, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials. I guess we are all in it together, you know, working with RSLs and with veterans organisations to expand on those terrific programs like the veterans card. I love it, and I just note, just for you, Minister, that our Anzac Day commemorations in Point Cook have been going up and up and up over the last three years since we have started to do it at the local footy club, so we are just seeing more interest in our veterans community all the time. Thank you for your leadership in this space. I am going to take us to the 'Department Performance Statement', page 44, on the number of veterans employed annually in the Victorian public sector. I do note your presentation as well, talking through the total numbers and the announcement most recently. I am hoping you can talk about the change in the target for 2024–25 and tell us a little bit more about the program itself – give us a bit of the finer details that we do not always get from a line item in the budget.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much, Mr Hilakari, and thank you for your question. This is really an integral part of our support for veterans. Employment and transition of veterans into civilian life is one that is most important in our supports, as I said earlier on, that governments can provide for our veterans. It is why our government has really led the way, and I am really proud to say that. As a state we are doing much more in supporting our veterans, and in particular the veterans public sector employment program has been really successful. We have worked very hard in developing the public sector veteran employment strategy and deploying a range of initiatives, both to provide that support to veterans' transition away from active service but also to leverage, as we know, the unique skills of veterans and their experience and their capabilities in service into the Victorian community.

As part of that initiative our government has set pretty constructive targets for getting more veterans employed into the Victorian public sector. Whether that is in Victoria Police, Corrections Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria or any other department, veterans have so much to give and contribute. They developed a strong, capable skillset while they were serving our nation. It really is a win-win for our state, and of course supporting our veterans in whatever role that veterans choose. What we say is that, and I know that the veterans

community says this, when they fight for our country and defend our country, they should not have to fight for a job when they get back home and face challenges and barriers. That is why our public sector veterans employment target is all about supporting and transitioning younger veterans from service to civilian life and of course measuring how they are tracking when it comes to employing more veterans right across the government.

I was really pleased and proud to stand alongside the Premier and of course Major General McLachlan, who has led this initiative and program, to announce that we have beaten our target of 1500 veterans being employed in the public sector by June 2025, so we are over a year ahead of schedule. We also were able to announce that we are extending that target so we are able to employ 1800 veterans into the public sector by June 2025. I think that is a really significant milestone for our government. It also marks our determination in the leading the way as a state government in this space that is typically occupied by the federal government. It shows how important this program has been, by the numbers, both for the government and also for the Victorian community. As I said, we owe so much to every single veteran that has served our nation and our state. They do give so much and have very unique skills and experience that we can adopt in the public sector. It is only right that we provide those supports and government provides a pathway so that they can transition into civilian life.

As I have mentioned previously, I would like to again make special mention of Major General David McLachlan AO. David is an absolute inspiration, a champion when it comes to Victoria's veteran community. He works tirelessly as the government's veteran employment advocate to get more veterans employed. He really is a strong advocate, and as I said, a real champion when it comes to supporting veterans and really assisting government in this space. I thank him for his ongoing contribution, his continued service to our veterans, really assisting veterans get into meaningful jobs and supporting them through their journey, which is really important.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am going to come to the experience of veterans when they leave the defence force in a moment, but I just want to take us to the actual target and expected outcome that we achieved in 2023–24 – a more than 50 per cent increase on the target was the actual outcome, so it is just fantastic to be going way over the top. I note that in 2024–25 we have increased our target on that basis, because we have had such a successful outcome there. But, Minister, I am hoping we can speak to some the challenges that veterans do experience as they do leave the defence forces.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari, and again thank you for that question, and we know that veterans do encounter barriers and face challenges once they leave service life, in particular when it comes to employment, and during that transition from active service to civilian life. Those challenges can be quite varied depending on the experiences faced by our veterans. They can sometimes be around challenges in translating military skills into civilian terms, at times lacking mentorship when it comes to seeking civilian roles and limited access to professional networks. There are really unique barriers for veterans. They are quite special in their experiences, and also, as I said, transitioning as well is a real challenge from active service life, and that can make this transition quite challenging and daunting for some veterans.

It is also important to mention that these challenges do not always affect all veterans, but where they do impact it is important we step in and meet those challenges and provide those veterans with the appropriate supports and initiatives so that they are able to continue in a healthy and proactive way. Quite frankly it is something that our veterans, we owe it to them, and they deserve our support, and that is why we tackle these issues head-on. I am really proud, and we should be proud as a government. We are the government that actually introduced a veterans portfolio. We are the government, and the only government, that has a card specific for their veterans in Victoria, and I have other ministers from other jurisdictions compliment us and seek advice about what we are doing in relation to the veterans card.

We have meaningful employment opportunities and programs established for our veterans. For instance, we host the veteran employment workshops, the veteran employment network and of course we have the veteran mentor program. As you can see, there are many, many support programs and really specific programs, I should say, that assist strategically veterans so that they can overcome some of those obstacles, and, as I said, the veteran employment workshop and the mentoring program have been absolutely instrumental in that effort, creating peer-to-peer networks, providing valuable resources for our veterans, and not only in the workshops that I have seen – they also provide practical tips and guidance on public sector opportunities. They are also

focused on crucial employment support and really assisting veterans to navigate the system. I think that is really important. These are hardworking veterans that put their lives during service, and when they do step out they do have the issues, the simple issues such as how to write a resume and interview preparation, planning for career advancement, and of course what we do as part of this program also is pair up veterans with mentors who will be able to guide them through the mentor program, again, as I said, successfully navigating the transition to civilian life.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister and Mr Hilakari. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. Last year the Labor government implemented a limited scheme to allow RSLs to surrender their pokies entitlements to the government. However, this scheme only applies to venues with unused entitlements, not those who may be wanting to move away from pokies entirely. Minister, will you advocate to your ministerial colleagues to expand this scheme to support all RSLs who want to transition away from pokies?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question. Can I begin by thanking RSL Victoria for their commitment and the work they do for veterans and their families to deliver better outcomes – as I said, not only for veterans but also their families across the state. They do really important work. Whether it is on the Anzac Day appeal or through local sub-branches or in their advocacy for support services, RSLs play a really important and integral role for our local communities, providing them with a place of connection and support. If you visit local RSLs, you will see some of the work that they do. We have provided extensive –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Minister, I appreciate the provisions that have been given by this government, but will you advocate to your colleagues so that all RSLs can transition away from pokies?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Look, as I said, RSL Victoria plays an integral role for their sub-branches. What I will say is decisions in relation to gaming machines and RSL operations are a matter for RSL Victoria and individual sub-branches. We will continue to support RSL Victoria in the work that they do to support veterans and their families, whether it is the RSL Active program that we are supporting this financial year or the great work that they do during the Anzac Day appeal. Also, let us be quite honest: some of these RSL sub-branches are run by volunteers, and they work very hard in making sure that these organisations and these sub-branches continue to support veterans and their families. We have, as I said, a good partnership with RSL Victoria because they do good work for veterans and their families. As I said, any other matters in relation to gaming machines are a matter for RSL Victoria and their sub-branches.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, page 120, and the veteran welfare output, noting in post-budget commentary from Vasey RSL Care, Victoria's leading provider of ex-service housing, care and support, which said that the budget was:

... an absolute oversight to vulnerable veterans.

Their main concern was around housing for vulnerable veterans, and they are seeking both a state – I thought I had 5 minutes.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Puglielli.

Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the small business portfolio at 4:40 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.