

Aide-Mémoire

Meeting with the Minister of Defence and Minister for Veterans, 14 February 2024

Date due to MO: 9 February 2024 **Action required by:** 14 February 2024

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Health Report number:** H2024035408

To: Hon Matt Doocoy, Minister for Mental Health

Consulted: Health New Zealand: Māori Health Authority:

Contact for telephone discussion

Name	Position	Telephone
Robyn Shearer	Deputy Director-General, Clinical, Community and Mental Health Te Pou Whakakaha	s 9(2)(a)
Kiri Richards	Associate Deputy Director-General, Mental Health and Addiction	s 9(2)(a)

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Details of meeting: You are meeting with the Minister of Defence, Hon Judith Collins, and Minister for Veterans, Hon Chris Penk, on 14 February 2024, 5-5.30pm, in 5.3L EW.

Purpose: The purpose of the meeting is to discuss mental health in relation to the Defence portfolio.

As requested by your office, Robyn Shearer, Deputy Director-General of Clinical, Community and Mental Health from the Ministry of Health will attend this meeting to support you.

Comment: **Background**

- The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) and the Ministry of Defence are separate entities that work closely together to deliver the Government's defence priorities and advise the Minister of Defence.
- Within the NZDF there is a Veterans' Affairs office that advises the Minister for Veterans and delivers services to veterans.

Mental health issues for current and former defence force members

- Military service involves factors that can be protective of mental health, such as security of employment and income, confidence, camaraderie and community.
- However, military service also presents mental health risks – particularly around combat exposure, moral injury exposure and the stress of long and frequent deployments.
- Trauma in service people is common compared to the general population. An NZDF survey¹ in 2019 found that:
 - 46% of regular force respondents and 44% of civilian respondents said they had experienced trauma
 - 27% of the regular force group said trauma had been a result of time in service with NZDF.

¹ NZ Defence Force (2019). Health and Wellbeing Survey (unpublished)

- A 2018 study of a cohort of Australian veterans² found that:
 - an estimated 46% of those who had transitioned from full-time service within the past five years met 12-month diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder
 - anxiety disorders (37.0%) were the most common amongst the transitioned group, while affective disorders such as depression were 23.1%, alcohol disorder 12.9%, and suicidal ideation or attempts 20%.
- The NZDF does not receive funding through Vote Health for the mental and physical health of its service people. It funds healthcare through Vote Defence.

NZDF mental health workforce and initiatives

- For those serving in the military, the NZDF offers a range of mental health initiatives, including mental health promotion resources, resilience training and mental health support.
- The NZDF employs a range of staff to support the health and mental wellbeing of people serving in the military, including primary care health practitioners (GPs, nurses, military medics), general scope psychologists (for prevention, screening and early intervention), chaplains, social workers, and marae staff.
- The NZDF has a representative on the cross-agency mental health and addiction workforce group that is convened by the Ministry of Health, which discusses respective needs and concerns in relation to various occupational groups.
- In that forum, the NZDF has noted that workforce issues include a perception of increased mental health presentations, delays in accessing secondary services, and high mobility of service personnel impacting on ability to access community care (although less so with the increased availability of telehealth).
- Areas of focus for NZDF's health workforce development efforts include increasing mental health skills in their primary care workforce, increasing cultural competence, and encouraging post-graduate training diplomas related to mental health assessment and mild-to-moderate interventions.

Veterans' Affairs' support and initiatives

- Veterans are those who have completed a period of military service, but who no longer serve. It is estimated that there are over 140,000 veterans in New Zealand.
- The Veterans' Support Act 2014 defines what support can be provided to those with Qualifying Service and their families and whānau.
- For those eligible, Veterans' Affairs provides health, rehabilitation and financial support for conditions related to their service. Around 10,000 people are currently receiving support from Veterans' Affairs.

² Van Hooff M, Lawrence-Wood E, Hodson S, Sadler N, Benassi H, Hansen C, Grace B, Avery J, Searle A, Iannos M, Abraham M, Baur J, McFarlane A, 2018, Mental Health Prevalence, Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study, the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra

- Depression and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are among the top conditions for which veterans seek support.
- *The Veteran, Family and Whānau Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy Framework, Te Arataki*³, outlines the strategic approach to improving the wellbeing of military veterans, their families and whānau.
- Under this framework sits a July 2023–December 2024 Work Programme that outlines actions across a range of agencies. Linked to one of the actions, the Suicide Prevention Office supported work on examining administrative data sets that might provide data on veteran suicide. The data was found to be patchy.
- Subsequently, Veterans' Affairs and the Social Wellbeing Agency have been working to define the cohort of service personnel that researchers need to access and study, including through the Integrated Data Infrastructure (where Vietnam veterans' data has recently been added).
- A key health action, being led by Health New Zealand, is a newly developed veteran identifier within the health information system that will enable GPs to be aware of specific health needs associated with having a military service history.

Potential discussion points

- *Kia Manawanui Aotearoa: Long-Term Pathway to Mental Wellbeing* includes acknowledgement of veterans as a group with specific mental health and addiction needs.
- Transitioning service personnel out of the military and back into civilian life is likely to be a key issue for both the Minister of Defence and Minister for Veterans.
- In that context, you can speak to your priorities for the mental health portfolio, particularly around growing the mental health and addiction workforce, and increasing access to mental health and addiction services for all New Zealanders.
- This aide-mémoire discloses all relevant information.



Kiri Richards

**Associate Deputy Director-General
Mental Health and Addiction**

³ <https://www.veteransaffairs.mil.nz/about-veterans-affairs/our-programmes/mental-health-framework>

Talking points for meeting with Ministers of Defence and Veterans

Defence forces' mental health support

- I understand that those serving in the defence forces can gain mental health protections from employment, increased confidence, camaraderie and sense of community.
- But that they can also experience mental health impacts from deployment that are different to anything most citizens encounter, and often experience challenges associated with transitioning out of the defence forces.
- It's important that mental health services can effectively recognise and support the mental health needs of military personnel and veterans.
- To that end, I understand the NZDF employs a diverse workforce including psychologists, but also relies on the health system to provide more specialised support.

Questions:

- What current initiatives and priorities are there around mental health and addiction support provided by the NZDF?
- What are the main challenges that military personnel experience in seeking mental health and addiction support within the health system?

Veterans' mental health

- I understand that Veterans' Affairs provides health, rehabilitation and financial support where those people have a condition related to their service.
- Veterans' Affairs also has a strategy and work programme that responds to veterans' mental health needs. Health officials, including the Suicide Prevention Office, are involved in this work.

Questions:

- What are the key current issues and priorities related to support for veterans' mental health?
- What progress is there in pursuing cross-agency initiatives that support veterans' mental health?

Your priorities

- My key mental health and addiction portfolio priorities – around increased access to services, growing the workforce, and strengthening prevention and early intervention – are matters of common interest across our portfolio.
- While the NZDF has support services for mild to moderate mental health needs, health sector services such as increased availability of telehealth supports, can also assist.
- Work underway to enable veterans to be identified within the health system will mean that GPs can better address health needs for patients with a military service history.
- I am committed to ensuring specialist mental health and addiction services become increasingly available over time, as work progresses on my priorities around improving access and growing the workforce.
- Working in conjunction with the education sector, I am also committed to giving specific attention to increasing training of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists.