

## THE LAW



## VETERANS' AFFAIRS

## Stress treatment boost for soldiers

Current and former Defence personnel, including those with peacetime service, may soon get easier access to mental health treatment under a new bill passed by federal parliament.

The Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (Mental Health and Other Measures) Bill 2014 was introduced to the House by Assistant Minister for Defence Stuart Robert.

"The bill reflects this government's commitment to recognising the unique nature of military service," he said.

"Tackling mental health challenges for veterans and their families is one of the four pillars of our plan for veterans and their families."

Services are being expanded to allow soldiers who have been diagnosed with alcohol or substance abuse conditions to receive treatment, regardless of whether the condition is service related.

Rules will also be changed so that those who completed three years of peacetime service after 7 April 1994 will now be eligible for treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"This means that treatment for the mental health conditions of PTSD, anxiety and depressive disorders and alcohol and substance use disorders will be available without the need for the condition to be accepted as related to the member's service," Mr Robert said.

Current and serving peacetime members such as those working on border protection, in a disaster zone or involved in a training accident will also be able to attend counselling.

"It is recognised that military peacetime service has its own risks for exposure to traumatic events and impact on mental health," Mr Robert said.

Services for families through the Veterans Families Counselling Service are also set to be expanded.

Partners and dependent children up to the age of 26 and parents of members killed in service-related incidents will be able to access counselling.

Member for Canberra Gai Brodtmann, who also spoke in support of the bill, said it was impossible to exaggerate what Australia owes to its service personnel and their families.

"In thanking them for their sacrifices and showing our gratitude for the work they do in securing our nation and preserving the democracy here, we have to ensure that we provide the highest standard of care for them when they return," she said.

Former minister for defence science and personnel Warren Snowden told the House that those who have done

compensation and other entitlements, are also included in the legislation.

At present around \$166 million is spent each year on mental health services.

Mr Robert said there has been extensive consultation with ex-services organisations on the matters included in the bill.

"I am pleased that there is broad support for these reforms," he said.

"There will be further ongoing discussion with the ex-service organisations on the implementation of these changes."

There has been an increasing focus in recent years on whether there is adequate care for soldiers returning from deployment in war zones such



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service potentially need to be looked after for the rest of their lives.

"What we have to acknowledge is that once we accept someone into the Defence Force we see them as part of the family that we need to look after, ultimately until they are dead," he said.

"That means ongoing care not only of them but also, in particular circumstances, their families."

Other measures regarding the operation of the Veterans Review Board, which reviews decisions relating to pensions,

as Iraq and Afghanistan who may have PTSD or other mental health problems.

The issue was put on the agenda by those such as retired Major General John Cantwell, the former national commander of Australian Defence Forces in Afghanistan.

Major General Cantwell wrote a book about his battle with PTSD and depression and warned a parliamentary inquiry in 2012 that Defence will face further challenges to care for soldiers returning from Afghanistan. ■