



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Veterans' Affairs Legislation
Amendment (Budget Measures) Bill 2017**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 1 June 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Thursday, 1 June 2017 Page 6031 Questioner Speaker Prentice, Jane, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Mrs PRENTICE (Ryan—Assistant Minister for Social Services and Disability Services) (11:29): As a government and as a country, we must do everything in our power to support Australia's service men and women, veterans and veterans' families. The coalition's fair and equitable 2017 budget supports Australia's veteran community. The Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (Budget Measures) Bill 2017, a bill welcomed by the veteran community, will implement three of the government's 2017 budget announcements for their community.

Specifically, this bill will provide medical treatment for all conditions to Australian participants of the British nuclear tests and Australian veterans of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. This is a welcome measure, as the longstanding provisions within the Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986 had no scope for the participants to be granted treatment for all conditions based on the nature of this service alone. This amendment, however, will provide full treatment for all conditions to those who participated in the British nuclear testing program in Australia at Maralinga. It also seeks to include those veterans who served as part of the BCOF who took part in the occupation of Japan immediately after the Second World War. In recognition of these veterans' possible exposure to ionising radiation, the government will provide a gold card to veterans which will enable them to access medical treatment for all conditions.

A local constituent, a retired serviceman in his late 80s telephoned my office just after the 2017 budget announcement and was incredibly grateful that he was finally getting access to a DVA gold card. For him this not only provides certainty for his health care but also forms a significant recognition of the invisible danger to which he and many of his fellow colleagues were exposed.

I must also note that this measure includes a number of civilians who were in the same vicinity as these tests. This includes pastoralists and members of the Indigenous community.

The second measure of this bill amends the current outdated work history restrictions for the special and intermediate rates of disability pension to better reflect working norms. The special rate of pension was designed for severely disabled veterans of a relatively young age who could never go back to work and could never hope to support themselves or their families or put away money for their retirement. On the other hand, the intermediate rate of pension was designed for veterans who can only work on a part-time basis due to a service-related disability. The changes proposed in this measure remove the current requirement for claimants 65 years or older to have worked for 10 years in the same profession. This further beneficial measure for veterans will now mean that they would require a period of 10 continuous years of work in any field or vocation prior to an application for the special or intermediate rates of disability pension.

The last schedule of this bill will enable early access to rehabilitation through a pilot program by inserting instrument-making powers into the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation (Defence-related Claims) Act 1988 and the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004. This would enable the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission to determine a class of persons eligible to participate in an early access to rehabilitation pilot program. Presently, rehabilitation can only be provided once liability has been determined, a matter which can take months to resolve. A six-month pilot program providing early access to rehabilitation to 100 participants will be undertaken in the 2017-18 financial year.

Just like the coalition's determination to ensure our Defence personnel seek early intervention for mental health conditions for positive outcomes, so too are we determined to ensure early access to rehabilitation. Early access will facilitate the individuals partaking in economic activities with all of the ensuing benefits of work and recovery. This participation in economic activity will also assist in minimising the ongoing effects of injury and illness and promote recovery and wellbeing. Currently, veterans and ADF members with eligibility under SRCA or MRCA have to wait until their initial liability claim is accepted before they can access rehabilitation services. Assessing a claim typically takes around four months, and for complex cases it can take even longer.

As those of us from Defence families know, the war does not stop on the battlefield. In most instances—cases may vary by individual—Defence personnel exhibit some form of post-deployment challenge, such as a change in sleep patterns or reclusion. In more serious cases we see violence and substance and alcohol abuse. The families of deployed servicemen and servicewomen bear the brunt of military life, so it is fitting that there are organisations in Australia that seek to help those who fall on hard times.

I segue now to an organisation of which I am patron and in which I take a great deal of interest and support: Wounded Heroes. Wounded Heroes is a national community organisation established in 2008 to provide first response support services for deployed personnel, the wounded and their families. As an emergency crisis support provider, Wounded Heroes provides short-term emergency relief payments to individuals and their families. This can mean paying to put the electricity back on or filling the fridge with food if the family is going through a challenging time. Through my contact with the CEO of Wounded Heroes, Mr Martin Shaw, and their president, Jim Shapcott, I have been told that a lot of emergency response support goes to sufferers of PTSD. PTSD does not rest solely with the wounded hero. It also affects smaller heroes—the children, who, as I mentioned, so often bear the brunt of postdeployment issues.

I mention Exercise Stone Pillow to demonstrate the dedication of Army Corporal Elena Rowland, who established the cause in 2013 when she recognised a need for a better understanding of the issue of homelessness within the Australian veteran community. This exercise also raises vital funds for organisations which provide housing and support to homeless veterans and their families. I commend Wounded Heroes for their continued campaign to care for Australian defence personnel and their families.

To ensure that the benefits of this bill are reaped by the veterans community, the timely passage of this bill is critical. These beneficial measures should be supported by all in this House. I am proud to be part of this coalition government, which has invested an additional \$350 million in the 2017 budget to support veterans. I place on record my appreciation and praise for the efforts of our defence force and indeed former, current and future personnel for their service. I commend this bill to the House.