



Submission

Response to Productivity Commission Draft Report: A better way to support veterans

Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health (Orygen) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's draft report, *A Better Way to Support Veterans*.

About Orygen

Orygen is the world's leading youth mental health organisation, providing cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services and evidence-based training and education to ensure continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health. Located in Melbourne, Orygen has over 300 staff working on early intervention in youth mental health for a range of mental health disorders, including psychosis (disorders such as schizophrenia), anxiety, depression, and suicide and self-harm prevention. Orygen's early intervention solutions include functional recovery (getting young people back to work and back to school), online interventions and novel therapies.

Meeting the needs of young veterans

The Productivity Commission has identified that a new Defence Portfolio – the Veteran Services Commission (VSC) should be responsible for funding, commissioning or providing mental health services to eligible veterans. The draft report recognises that mental health and suicide are important health issues for serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel, those transitioning out of service and veterans and that the risk of experiencing mental ill-health or dying by suicide is greater than for the Australian population.

Orygen, outlined in its original submission that the mental health risk is greatest for serving personnel and veterans aged under 30 years. While the Productivity Commission's draft report recognised there has been a heightened focus on veterans' mental health and suicide in recent years, innovation is required to improve service access and delivery for young veterans. There is an opportunity for innovation through the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the system of compensation and rehabilitation for military veterans.

Since the publication of the original Issues Paper, *Compensation and Rehabilitation for Veterans* Orygen in partnership with Phoenix Australia, Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health released a policy report focused on young veterans and their mental health needs, *The Next Post: Young people transitioning from military service and their mental health* (attached with this submission). The report details policy and service recommendations informed by wide ranging stakeholder consultation. Three key policy opportunities were identified in the report and are presented in this submission. For further detail, including the evidence-base, stakeholder perspectives and policy rationale refer to *The Next Post* policy report.

Comprehensive psychosocial health assessment

Although young veterans face a greater risk of mental ill-health compared with both older veterans and their peers in the Australian population, there is no mandatory mental health assessment prior to transition. Several stakeholders engaged in researching *The Next Post* policy report stated there needs to be a comprehensive assessment as to why the young person is transitioning and any associated mental health needs, including the need to be mindful that issues may be emerging and sometimes masked by physical injuries and/or behavioural issues. The general consensus was that anyone under the age of 25 transitioning from the ADF should undergo a comprehensive assessment, regardless of the reason for discharge.

Mandatory and comprehensive psychosocial health assessments would indicate the level of support a young veteran might require. This function would fit within the Productivity Commissions' proposed new Joint Transition Command.

Policy opportunity

Mandatory and comprehensive psychosocial health assessments by a military and youth aware mental health professional prior to transition to:

- assess mental health/psychosocial health
- 'debrief' on their experiences of military service
- identify risk factors relating to transition
- establish connection with services they can access in the future.

This assessment will guide the selection of suitable services, and where required, facilitate referrals to appropriate mental health services.

Targeted support hubs

It is difficult to determine how many young veterans are accessing mental health services. The Productivity Commission's draft report recognised that some supports for young veterans, who are at risk during transition are poorly targeted. International evidence suggests that service access among younger veterans with diagnosable mental disorders is low. While a number of factors that can

contribute to low service access, existing veteran services, the majority of which were developed for a previous generation of veterans often do not meet the needs of young veterans.

Targeted and uniquely branded support 'hubs' for transitioning and young veterans (with scope to extend into the 25-29 age range) are required. Psychosocial health assessments conducted prior to transition would indicate the level of service a young veteran could be provided through these 'hubs.' These 'hubs' would fall under the remit of the proposed VSC.

Policy opportunity

Targeted and uniquely branded support 'hubs' for transitioning and young ex-service personnel (with scope to extend into the 25-29 age range) are required. Younger veterans should be co-designers of this service to ensure it is appropriate to their requirements.

Comprehensive support from the commencement of the transition process for a period of up to 12 months post-discharge would be provided with the objective of connecting people with the appropriate support services.

These local hubs would provide:

- a point of coordination and (if necessary) case management for the individual, family, command and appropriate services
- an accessible point of contact for ex-serving personnel to navigate available support.

Three levels of service would be provided based on the risk (low, moderate, and high) of mental health or psychosocial adjustment problems. The program would be staffed by professionals with experience working with young people who are militarily competent and have the skills to provide tailored guidance on appropriate services to support individuals at different stages of their transition as well as low-intensity psychological interventions targeting transition-related issues.

The hubs could be delivered through a variety of sites to maximise engagement. Sites could include military bases, existing Open Arms (formally VVCS) services, DCO Transition Centres or through innovative or distance based mobile services or some combination of the above.

Improving engagement

The transition process and the provision of support services following separation are important in ensuring young veterans at risk of poor mental health outcomes are supported. There is an opportunity to expand the existing trials implemented by the combined Defence/Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) Transition Taskforce to include innovative approaches to improve the transition process and structures to better support young serving and ex-serving personnel. The Productivity Commission's draft report identified that neither Defence nor DVA has clear responsibility for preparing members

for transition or post-discharge support which means that many miss out on effective transition support.

In *The Next Post* policy report Orygen and Phoenix Australia identified that opportunities to improve transition outcomes for young serving personnel and veterans begins at recruitment, continues through transition, the post-separation phase and integration back into the community. At every stage, recognition of a young person's wellbeing and the potential need for mental health support must be identified and provided.

The Productivity Commission's draft report similarly identified that timely and effective transition services should be available from early in a veteran's career, during transition and post-service; recommending the functions of a proposed new Joint Transition Command would 'engage with veterans early in their careers' and 'provide more tailored information and support.'

Policy opportunity

New initiatives to develop accessible service pathways for young service personnel (especially those with less than one year of service) and young veterans.

An additional Transition Taskforce 'reach in' trial be undertaken with a specific focus on engaging young service personnel during the recruitment process, initial training and within their first year of service.

A dedicated suite of online, mobile and social media platforms (e.g. Orygen's Moderated Online Social Therapy) be developed and evaluated for service access and treatment delivery for young veterans.

Learning from existing youth services will assist DVA (or its replacement) to develop acceptable awareness campaigns and service delivery models. The potential benefits of a 'youth' focused brand and approach developed in partnership with young serving personnel and veterans should be investigated.

Summary

The Productivity Commission's draft report addresses many of the issues identified in *The Next Post* policy report. To ensure reforms intended to improve veteran wellbeing through prevention, rehabilitation and transition support are successful a specific focus on young veterans is required in the Productivity Commission's final report. The inclusion of mandatory and comprehensive psychosocial health assessments for young ADF members transitioning out of service within the proposed new Joint Transition Command together with the funding, commissioning or provision of targeted and uniquely branded support 'hubs' for transitioning and young veterans (with scope to extend into the 25-29 age range) through the proposed VSC would provide a foundation for improved mental health outcomes.

Further information

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