

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 5 June 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Natalie Suleyman MP, Minister for Veterans; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management,

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, and

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

The CHAIR: Thank you. 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 2025–26 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, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if it is said quietly.

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

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. 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 committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Chair. I thank the committee for the opportunity to present on our recent achievements and the 2025–26 budget outcomes in the veterans portfolio. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and 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 focused on enhancing the wellbeing of Victorian veterans and their families, commemorating their service and ensuring they receive the support they deserve. Veterans are an asset to our state, and we are committed to supporting their successful transition to civilian life here in Victoria. The Victorian government is a national leader when it comes to state government tailored support for our veterans and commemoration of their service.

We have implemented the first-of-its-kind Veterans Card Victoria with the broadest criteria in the country, and we have over 20,000 veterans registered. The veterans card allows us to deliver real recognition and cost-of-living and practical support for veterans in Victoria. This year we have reached our target of assisting 1800 veterans to find good, secure jobs in Victoria's public sector. We have continued the public sector veteran employment strategy, with additional funding in this year's budget. We have also continued our very successful community grants programs to ex-service organisations. This includes the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund, Victoria remembrance grant program, veterans capital works and the Restoring Community War Memorials and Avenues of Honour grants. Through these popular programs, we have provided \$2.6 million in funding directly to community groups across 88 projects in 2024–25. We have also delivered on the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize, with two successful study tours to Gallipoli last year. This year we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of

the prize, and I look forward to meeting the next 12 students who will travel to Gallipoli, Türkiye, in September this year. Importantly, we are continuing to work with the Commonwealth to deliver meaningful, lasting change through the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

The 2025–26 Victorian budget continues this government's investment in the veterans portfolio. We have provided an additional \$2.4 million over two years to the Shrine of Remembrance so that they can continue to deliver and support Victoria's veteran community. The Shrine of Remembrance is a place of national and state significance, and we are really proud of its enduring impact and legacy. We are also seeing increased numbers of visitors from Victoria and of course overseas as well. This investment will support essential maintenance and its operations 365 days a year.

This budget also provides \$800,000 over two years to continue the public sector veteran employment strategy. We are committed to employing more than 500 ex-ADF personnel over the next two years. The government's veterans employment advocate Major General David McLachlan will continue this essential work. This important program supports young veterans after service and continues to assist veterans to also engage in local communities and get on with the next chapter of their lives.

In this state we value our veterans and their families. The funding in this year's budget demonstrates our absolute, solid commitment to honouring the sacrifices of our veterans through both Anzac Day and Remembrance Day but also every day of the year. We saw more than 50,000 people this year gather at the Anzac Day dawn service at the shrine, demonstrating the incredible support from the Victorian community. In closing, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all veterans for their service and the many, many organisations that support them each and every day. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Minister, the veterans card that was mentioned in the presentation then – 20,000 is the number registered? Is that correct?

Natalie SULEYMAN: That is correct – so far, over 20,000.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. We know that there are around 100,000 veterans in the state. That is about a fifth of veterans. Why do you think there is such a slow uptake?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question. Just again, I am really proud of the Victorian veterans card. This initiative is the first for this nation, and as I have indicated, there are over 20,000 veterans that have registered since its launch in July 2023, which is around 20 per cent of eligible veterans, we believe. We know that this program is important, and what I do say, importantly, is this card has been something that the veterans community has embraced. But of course there needs to be more work when it comes to providing awareness. Sometimes veterans, for many reasons, do not register, and this is why it is so important. I have been receiving feedback and consulting with our veterans community to look at how to better this. I encourage committee members in your local communities to really promote the Victorian veterans card. We know that it is a card that provides some cost-of-living relief: \$100 off rego for light vehicles, free rego for trailers and of course free marine boating licences, a fishing licence exemption and free public transport on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day. My message to committee members, and I think to everybody, is that we need to continue to work in partnership with our local RSL sub-branches and of course our veterans groups and stakeholders to promote the Victorian veterans card. This is really important.

Jade BENHAM: No-one is denying that. I am just wanting to get to the reason why. For example, I was with a couple of Victorian veterans on Sunday who want a hard copy of a card. Is that on the cards? That is why they will not uptake it.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you so much. That is important feedback. We are always looking at ways to improve the card into the future, and I am happy to explore that feedback and look at ways that we can improve the card. But as I have said, over 20,000 veterans is not a small number. That is significant.

Jade BENHAM: No, but is that the first time you have heard that feedback? Is that not something that has come across your desk before?

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think the important thing for the program is the fact that we are the first state –

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, Minister. Again, in the interest of time – I have got very short time and it goes so quickly – have you heard that feedback before? Has the department heard that feedback before? And will you commit to a hard copy of the card so that there is a more significant uptake of it? It has been around for a couple of years now, I believe.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Just to clarify, the veterans card is an online service through the Service Victoria website. Of course there is the opportunity to also print off the actual card so you do have a hard copy of the veterans card. That is available.

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, that veterans can print off themselves?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Absolutely they can print it off.

Jade BENHAM: Okay, not the department sending a plastic one.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Again, I want to say for the committee: this is no small number. We have seen over 20,000 veterans sign up so far. I would encourage the committee members, stakeholders and local RSL sub-branches to continue to promote this fantastic initiative. As I said, this is a first for the nation. We are leaders in this space, and I know that other states look to us in relation to our Victorian veterans card. As you would appreciate, it is a very small way of us acknowledging and saying thank you to our veterans for their service and sacrifice. More importantly, it also is an opportunity for ADF personnel to be part of the veterans card, and it does provide, as I said, some cost-of-living measures. Of course we know that it is important for younger veterans to remain active, and I know that the free –

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Minister. Again, in the interests of time I might got to Mr Coutts. Do you have any insights into why the uptake has been so slow?

Lauren KATHAGE: Why is it slow? It is not slow.

Jade BENHAM: Twenty thousand over two years is not quick, and it is the feedback that we have directly received. I am just wondering if there are any other reasons for it, and then I want to move on to the shrine in the last minute that I have left.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think I have answered the question. I have made it very clear that we have seen over 20,000 veterans in this state register online –

Jade BENHAM: So you have not had any other feedback?

Natalie SULEYMAN: They have taken up this really fantastic program, and we are proud of this program.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Thank you, Minister. If we can talk about the Shrine of Remembrance here, I think in the presentation I saw \$2.4 million over two years. Is that more than the shrine was receiving last year?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Sorry, which page are you referring to in the budget papers?

Jade BENHAM: I was actually referring to your presentation at the beginning, where it illustrated the figures. I am just wanting to know whether the shrine is getting an increased budget this year, and if so, how much?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you for that question. In the 2025–26 budget the government, through the veterans portfolio, will provide the shrine with over \$4.4 million to support its operation each and every day. That is an increase of \$1.2 million per annum.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Is the additional funding to the shrine tagged for particular programs or projects?

Natalie SULEYMAN: This funding, and of course the increase of \$1.2 million per annum to the shrine, will contribute to the shrine's operating costs, including program delivery and essential building maintenance of the Shrine of Remembrance. As I have indicated, this is an increase of \$1.2 million per annum from last year.

Jade BENHAM: But the shrine lost \$4.1 million last year, so why are you not covering that loss? Or is that the operational cost that it covers?

Natalie SULEYMAN: If you can, where is the reference in the budget papers?

Jade BENHAM: We are still on budget –

The CHAIR: We will go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Lauren KATHAGE: To me, if that is all right, Chair.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair. Minister and officials, thank you for sharing this so far. I did want to share a short reflection on the veterans card. After assisting a Vietnam veteran to receive his card, he actually made a lovely wooden carving for the office reflecting his time in Vietnam. He was really thankful for the veterans card, so thank you for everything that you are all doing in that regard.

I would like to refer you to BP3, page 38, where there is an initiative around veterans employment. Are you able to speak to what this initiative does, how it is supporting veterans in career changing, transitioning et cetera?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question, Ms Kathage. This is something that I am really proud of, the veteran employment program, which is supporting more younger veterans after service to enter through the Victorian public sector veteran employment strategy. This has been a key initiative of the Allan Labor government, to assist veterans making that transition from service into local communities and of course assisting in employment opportunity as well. This is absolutely important work for the veterans and in particular, as I said, for younger veterans, and I am really proud that the 2025–26 state budget will allocate \$800,000 to continue this work over two years and extend this strategy to June 2027. This is directly also delivering upon the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which has underscored the critical importance of stable, meaningful employment and really providing important support for younger veterans once they depart from service and of course their families. The transition from service life into local communities is really critical. I am really proud of the work that we are doing in relation to this program. It really does recognise the importance of – and of course is designed to reduce some of the gap in between – being able to assist veterans into secure employment in the public sector.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much, Minister, for making that connection between mental health and employment. I had not considered that on first blush. I would like to refer you to page 45 of the departmental performance statement. I can see there that there is a measure relating to the number of veterans employed annually in the Victorian public sector. Can you speak in practical terms about what the extension of this program, which you referred to in your presentation, means?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question and for the opportunity to speak on our government and the way that we are supporting in practical terms our younger veterans into meaningful and lasting employment. Since 2017 the Victorian government has delivered on our commitment to help veterans, as I said, transition into careers in the public service, in particular recognising the skills that they bring. It is really important to also acknowledge the skills that our ex-ADF personnel bring into some of these roles when assisting them through the transition. What we have seen through the department performance statement – if I can say this – is not only are we reaching our original goals but we are also exceeding our goals, and we have seen over 1800 young veterans across Victoria actually being employed by the public sector in areas such as corrections, police, emergency services and many more. I had the opportunity to speak to some of these younger veterans just recently through our employment forum. I want to also take the opportunity, if I can, to thank Major General David McLachlan, who has led this critical work. The work that he has been able to develop really does highlight what I have just noted as being important. The fact is that this is a program that is not only important but it is being used by younger veterans. We are exceeding our performance from our original goals, with over 1800 veterans employed across the Victorian public sector.

That is really important work; that is critical work. It is 1800 younger veterans and their families in our local communities that are able to enter the workforce. I am really proud that we are able to extend this program in

this year's budget for a further two years, and we will continue to meet our targets. The new target is to employ a further 526 young former ADF personnel, and I am very comfortable with the work that we have done in the past and that we will be able to meet this target by June this year. In real terms, these are important pathways for younger veterans, and I am very proud of this government, who really implemented this program. We have seen, as I just said earlier on, three areas in particular: 537 veterans employed as sworn Victoria Police members, 164 veterans in corrections and youth justice roles and 840 veterans employed across other Victorian government departments and agencies. That is pretty significant, and that is proud work and important work. This program is hitting those goals – exceeding the goals. This has been a really important program, and as I have indicated, it is really proud work led by Major General David McLachlan. I look forward to continuing this program for the next two years.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. I really like hearing about the practical support around cost of living and employment that is being provided. Still on page 45, on that performance statement, there is a measure there relating to grants. Are you able to provide an overview of the different grant programs that are available?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you again, Ms Kathage, for that question. Our grant program is something that we are very proud of, because we have been working in partnership with our veterans community and stakeholders for many, many years. The funding of these projects right across the state supports community groups and ensures that significant war memorials and places of remembrance are preserved. It is really important for us as a community to continue to remember and preserve and also give veterans support when it comes to health and wellbeing. We have four dedicated annual grants programs which provide opportunities for community groups, sub-branches of RSLs and other organisations, to honour, support and assist veterans and their families in meaningful and practical ways.

In 2024–25 our government committed \$2.6 million to 68 projects across the states. We will continue to fund and support ex-service organisations to deliver innovative welfare and wellbeing programs for veterans and their families. For instance, we have many programs that provide unique support for younger veterans, and applications for the 2025–26 round are expected to open in July of this year. I encourage committee members to please promote and spread the information. Some of the programs include restoring community war memorials and avenues of honour, and another is our veterans capital works grant program. This is really important. For instance, we have seen our partnership with Vasey RSL Care, who have received funding to refurbish five accommodation units in Geelong as part of the Geelong veteran renewal initiative. This supports veterans at risk of homelessness. This is really important, and I thank the work that Vasey RSL Care does for our veterans. We were able to provide a small grant that was able to assist this particular project in ensuring that our veterans have a safe place and are supported if at risk of homelessness. They also provide wraparound services, which is really important as well for our veterans. So as you can see, together with these grant programs and our partnerships, we are making those both commemorative and practical initiatives that directly benefit the Victorian veteran community.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. RSL Victoria have reported numerous instances of veterans being denied health care by providers who refuse to accept their DVA veterans healthcare cards. Is the department aware of this issue?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question. Your question relates probably more to the Commonwealth, as DVA is under their scope. But do you have anything to add?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: I think that is absolutely right, Minister. That is a matter for the Commonwealth government.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: has the state raised this with federal counterparts?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question. Can I say that we continue to consult and work through some of those issues, and in particular some of the issues in relation to DVA. This is not something that has just appeared today, this is an ongoing issue, and this is something that the royal commission of course also incorporated in their deliberations. We will work with the Commonwealth and other

states in relation to DVA matters but also any other issues that matter to our veterans and their families in Victoria.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: what is the total budget allocated to the veterans portfolio?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for that question. I am very proud that this budget includes \$20.2 million for the 2025–26 budget. This is approximately 40 per cent higher than the 2024–25 target. This really does reflect our strong commitment to delivering for and supporting our veterans in Victoria and of course supporting our Shrine of Remembrance. As I have just indicated with some of our employment pathway opportunities through the public sector, that is a program that will extend for a further two years. So overall we see \$20.2 million in the 2025–26 budget, a 40 per cent increase from last year.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: are there any specific initiatives that would ensure veterans are protected from financial exploitation in RSL environments?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Just to note that we are very proud in Victoria to support our veteran community and most importantly work with our stakeholders.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister and 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 short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of small business and employment at 12:40 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.