

Minister for Veterans' Affairs Darren Chester has said an independent commission into veteran suicide will provide an "enduring focus" into an issue that has afflicted the Australian Defence Force for decades.

The National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill 2020, introduced to Parliament in August, proposes a Commissioner be established to examine veteran deaths by suicide and to recommend preventative measures.

Dr Bernadette Boss CSC has been appointed as interim National Commissioner while the legislation is before Parliament.

The body will review the 419 suicides of serving, reserve and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel from 2001 to 2017.

"It is absolutely critical that we try to understand all the factors connected to suicide and do all we can to build a better system of support," Mr Chester said.

The Commissioners inquiries will focus, among other things, on the availability of support services, the quality of those services and the extent to which these deaths represent a broader systemic issue.

An annual report presented to Parliament will serve as a summary of the Commission's findings and guidance for the steps that the Government and defence system can take.

"There is no single solution to this complex issue," Mr Chester said.

"That is why we are establishing a permanent, dedicated Commissioner who is focused on making inquiries and hearing from families, to prevent further suicides."

After the bill was introduced to Parliament, the Senate took part in a public consultation process, allowing individual submissions to be made.

A number of submissions expressed disappointment the bill proposed an Independent Commission, not a Royal Commission.

“I would prefer to see a broad open Royal Commission into defence and veteran suicide that gives families of deceased veterans and those fighting to keep loved ones alive a voice,” one anonymous statement said.

An Independent Commission is a continuous inquiry, whereas a Royal Commission has a strict deadline for its findings and recommendations to be made public.

President of the RSL, Major Greg Melick, said he was pleased the bill proposed an Independent Commission.

“Generally speaking, a lot of veterans families didn’t want a Royal Commission, especially the widows.”

A Royal Commission would prompt greater media coverage and “they didn’t want to relive it all and have it splashed all over the front page of the page”.

“The Commission has discretion to hold the hearings in such a manner as to minimise that,” Major Melick said.

He said an Independent Commission is likely to benefit veterans and their families “greatly” but says while it will provide relief for mental health support in the military, “you should always expect mental health issues from trauma”.

“You don't get a much more traumatic event than warfare.”

**If you, or someone you know, need support, contact:**

- Lifeline Australia – 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467
- Open Arms (current and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel and their families can seek this free and confidential support) – 1800 011 046
- ADF Mental Health All-hours Support Line (for current serving Australian Defence Force personnel and their families) on [1800 628 036](tel:1800628036).

