



Report 2019

Defence Special Needs Support Group

Report

Introduction

The Defence Special Needs Support Group Inc (DSNSG) is a not-for-profit benevolent volunteer organisation established to assist the Navy, Army and Air Force families with a family member with Special Needs. The Group provides support, information, assistance, advocacy and programs for all ADF families current and ex-serving who have a dependent child, spouse or other dependent with Special Needs.

DSNSG is a well-respected National Organisation with 23 local support groups, and well over 1100 families located both in Australia and overseas.

DSNSG has two National Co-Patrons; being the Minister for Veterans and Defence Personnel, Hon Darren Chester, MP and the Chief of the Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, AC, DSC. DSNSG also has our first Ambassador in Air Commodore Henrik Ehlers, AM, who joined us after completing 36 years in the Permanent Air Force, in March 2018.

DSNSG has supporting partners that support our programs and other services. They include: Defence Health, APS Benefits, Aspen Medical, Navy Health, Defence Housing Australia, and Toll Transitions. We are deeply grateful for their partnership and very practical assistance. Our strong business relationship has resulted in numerous successful projects and has brought more success to our Defence families. Partnerships of this kind are hard to find in the business world, where competition is always fierce. DSNSG is fortunate to have such amazing supporting partners that provide professional, effective and true support.

DSNSG particularly thanks DGDCO, Mr Paul Way, DCO National Helpline and regional DCO Offices in helping us to increase the understanding of Special Needs Families and working closely with DSNSG and our members. Over the years we have built a wonderful and committed relationship with HQDCO. We receive reasonable funding assistance from DCO to help with the operational costs of DSNSG.

DSNSG is very much about building, supporting and advocating for Defence Special Needs Families. DSNSG has built solid relationships over the years with organisations in a variety of sectors Australia wide. This has been possible because of our relentless commitment of DSNSG to work closely in understanding the needs of our Defence Special Needs Families.

This report summarises the feedback from our members received by Kim Collins CEO, and inputs from our dedicated National Executive Committee (NEC). It is important to note the feedback reflects the experiences and perceptions of members and has not been edited.

This report suggests some possible solutions to problems our members and their families continue to face and hopefully, sets a good starting point for our ongoing work with Defence and other stakeholders in the forthcoming year.

The lives of service families can be very different from those in the civilian world. We move more frequently and often have less control over our destiny. Whilst these experiences can enrich our lives, the upheaval of postings, deployments, field exercises, uncertainty about the future, lack of choice, as well as the isolation of being far from friends and family can make life much more difficult.

The challenges of military life are greater when you or a member of your family has a disability or an additional need. There are many questions to consider: When will we move? Will the housing be suitable? Will the local school be able to offer adequate support? How far are the local hospitals? What is the transport like? Will the same treatment, medications or services be available?

There is a responsibility on both the serving personnel and the partners/spouses to ensure that the family member's needs, including medical, educational and welfare requirements, are assessed properly before an overseas deployment, or posting. It is important to inform the chain of command of any additional needs and ensure that families are recognised with a dependant with Special Needs. Often families are not aware of the process that they should follow or what information is available.

Before outlining the feedback received over the past year, it is important to note that some issues will always be issues that cannot necessarily be 'solved' – they are outlined here as a reminder of the constant pressures on DSNSG families and the importance of decision-makers taking into account family circumstances in making decisions on support for families. We also recognise there are examples of excellent support to our members and, human nature being what it is, this feedback is generally directed at the local level and not shared widely. We nonetheless reflect here our appreciation for those that are supporting our members and families.

Finally, I would like to reflect on the value of reports such as this and engagement with policymakers in Defence. The 2018 report addressed the need for flexibility in a range of policies and practices in Defence. We were very pleased with how well the report was received and actions taken in response. Good examples being:

- Cooperation from DHA in not requesting further paperwork from families with Special Needs once the AC832 was recognised through DCO.

- Commitment from Defence People Group (DPG) to collaborate with DSNSG for our input in a forthcoming review of PACMAN requirements as they move to a ‘principles based’ approach.
- Advice from our co-patron, CDF, that our feedback is valuable in keeping the issues of Special Needs Families in the forefront of Defence leadership thinking.

Prepared by:

Authorised by:

Kim Collins

National Executive Committee

CEO

Defence Special Needs Support Group Inc.

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2019 Member and Families Feedback

Defence Approval Forms:

Frequent and constant feedback from our membership relates to the complexity of Defence approval paperwork in relation to Special Needs.

i.e.

AC835 Accessing services and equipment

AD355 Application for Assessment of Assistance on Posting

AC832 Application of Recognition and of Dependant With Special Needs

While the need for these forms is acknowledged, their complexity and information requirements are quite onerous and, often, very stressful for serving members and spouses/partners. We believe these forms need a review and redesign for usability. We are pleased to report that recent meetings with DCO, Head of People Capability and the Service DGPERSs have supported such a review, and the NEC have committed to working with Defence to provide input.

A related issue is the need to reapply for Special Needs recognition upon posting, relocation, or expiration of the four-year recognition period. This requirement (as noted below) places financial strain on families and is also very stressful. Further, requiring revalidation of specialist assessment letters older than two years is a financial burden and often does not add value as many conditions our family members have are lifelong. We see an opportunity to work with Defence to reform the approvals processes to recognise those conditions that periodic specialist validation adds no value.

As with this issue, we are pleased to report that preliminary discussions with Defence are supportive and we look forward to contributing to the reform.

Postings:

Posting in the ADF are always a source of stress for families. We have had consistent feedback relating to:

- The lack of adequate notice (i.e. less than 6 months) and out of cycle (i.e. unexpected) postings are preventing some families from accessing funding for those children who qualify for assistance with schooling. We know that simply enrolling a child in a school or accessing support through the school network can be a problem.
- Even with help from DSM, and the EDLO, children are still not coping with the changes of schooling and missing friends. Because of this, behavioural issues increase at school and at home.
- The Defence member's temporary accommodation has been booked through Toll without any regard to the physical restrictions of Special Needs dependants which were stated in their accommodation requirements. Members have had to source alternative accommodation at their own expense.

Financial:

Loss of income to the household makes it increasingly hard to afford the required specialist appointments for the family. In some locations spouses are at a disadvantage due to potential employers asking if they are Defence with the implied concern of short-term employment and preference for 'local' hires only. In many cases some spouses are unable to work in their desired profession.

- Families with small home businesses also are not well supported. One of the reasons spouses have home businesses is to help support the family, to put food on the table, and pay for Special Needs bills. Defence currently do not move home base business equipment. Families are at a loss with funds trying to organise the removal of the home-based business items. A huge financial loss is then placed on the family having to transfer across the nation for their work.
- Waiting lists for a new specialist to get new, or updated diagnoses when moving from state to state can also be an unexpected financial cost. The cost of a diagnosis is rising. Families are struggling to get into specialists and require to go onto a waiting list. In most cases families can be on a public waiting list for 6 months to 3 years. There are substantial differences in cost between public health and private sector specialists. Families are unable to afford \$1000's differences in fees. e.g. Ophthalmologist after posting into their new location.

- Families have been out of pocket about \$10,000 over a 3-year posting. The high volume of paperwork required to try and recuperate the costs through DCO is highly underestimated, especially if needing to put in paperwork for each child. Families have been put off applying for assistance because of the difficulty with completing the forms. Families have to pay for the specialists have to be paid up front, while not an issue for some families, single income families may not be able to afford to pay for these services. Families need to see the specialists to get the paperwork required to fill in the AD835. In most areas families cannot get the social worker at DCO to help with completing the form due to budget constraints.

Family Support:

Being new to a community, the ADF member and family may not be aware of all the support services available for a family with Special Needs.

Our Coordinator team are there to help families link into service providers in their location but need some help in making connections with members and families.

Another solution to assist our families and Coordinators could be to have a website that lists disability services in States, regions or towns.

Acknowledging the different requirements needed for recognition of conditions is important, but the requirements (once established) should not change from state to state. A recognition of Special Needs in one state should be enough to carry over into the next location. A National Recognition would relieve a lot of the financial burdens the ADF families are experiencing. This past year has seen significant increase in families becoming a Member with Dependants Unaccompanied (MWDU) as they feeling they have no choice. This is not an ideal situation for the families and is not supported by the chain of command.

Welfare Issues:

Not surprisingly, welfare issues are at the forefront of our minds. Key feedback we have received relates to:

- There is a consistent network of medical support for a serving member when being posted around the country, whether it is in the form of Open Arms, DVA or medical facilities.
- The Special Needs requirements within the family seem to be forgotten during posting time. Specialist teams are disrupted, and the family member with Special Needs almost always experiences a setback in one form or another.
- In some complex cases, some states medical teams do not meet the requirements to treat the Special Needs of the family. This could be from a lack of equipment, lack of qualified specialists or a lack of time to treat the family's needs, resulting in families needing to post unaccompanied.

Housing:

Housing support is critical to most of our serving members and their families. The issues that have been raised with us are:

- Special Needs Families feel like they are being judged for requesting housing modifications.
- Having DHA staff trained so that they understand the requirements for the modifications would give them the ability to communicate with the families in a more effective manner. Maybe a serving member with Special Needs within the family, posted or attached to DHA in peak posting periods to assist the staff with assessments of the modification requests would make the families feel more at ease.
- Removal companies rushing to complete the pickup or delivery, pushing for signatures when members haven't had enough time to count boxes and check for damages. Some removalists refuse to plug in the electrical goods to ensure they are working, and others refuse to conduct the valet unpack even when it is requested.

Consideration for Defence Force Additional Needs and Disability Forum:

Such forums could be held in the relevant ADF base locations to provide a chance for service members and their families to get information from and connect with local Additional and Disability need support groups. This will allow the families to share their issues, raise concerns and ask questions about issues that are affecting them. Representation from DCO who do the processing, DVA, Open Arms, DSNSG, Autism groups, Respite agencies etc.

Winding Up:

Military lifestyle brings a range of opportunities and experiences, but it can also create specific issues for families when they are experiencing continual mobility, separation due to deployments and training, and isolations can have a much greater impact. Special Needs Families live a unique transit lifestyle. The stresses placed on Special Needs Families when being posted is undeniably underestimated.

Opportunities for Collaboration in 2019

The feedback reported above has not been filtered and, in some instances, may not reflect extant policies or the experiences of all – it is, nonetheless, how our members and families feel.

DSNSG would like to work with Defence and supporting agencies to discuss opportunities to collaborate and act on the feedback we have received. Building on the successful engagements to date, we are hopeful that there can be a continued dialogue, opportunities to refine policies, improve communications, and harness Defence's and our supporting partners contacts across government and industry to move forward.

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