

How the DVA Budget is helping veterans

Minister for Veterans' Affairs Alan Griffin has recently published *Ten Benefits for Veterans in the 2009–10 Budget* in which he sets out how Veterans' Affairs Budget delivers \$11.8 billion, including \$6.5 billion for compensation and income support and a record \$4.9 billion for health and health services.

Pensions

More than 320,000 Veterans' Affairs pensioners will benefit from pension changes and \$1.1 billion in extra financial support has been allocated in the portfolio. Single service pensioners and war widows will receive a boost of up to \$32.49 a week, those on couples rate receiving an additional \$10.14 combined a week. These changes are aimed at those most reliant on income support to make ends meet. Those on a disability pension who also qualify for service, age or disability support pension, including more than 80% of TPI pensioners, will receive the increase in line with their financial circumstances.

The income-test taper rate will increase from 40 cents to 50 cents from 20 September 2009 but any current pensioner who would suffer a decrease in rate will be protected by being paid automatically at a transitional rate with no disadvantage.

Promises, promises — and how they're faring

At the last election, the then Opposition spokesman for Veterans' Affairs Alan Griffin — and now Minister — presented a comprehensive 28-page plan outlining his party's Veterans' Affairs policy to be implemented in a three-year term.

The test, since the election, has been to implement it.

"As we are now half way through the three-year term, it is timely to report on what has been implemented and where we are with progressing what remains," he says.

The implementation of items with an asterisk * appears next to legislation/regulations passed by the previous Government.

Provide fair indexation for all veterans' compensation pensions* From 20 March 2008, all veterans' compensation pensions are now indexed with reference to both Consumer Price Index and male total average weekly earnings.

An increase in the Extreme Disabling Adjustment (EDA) pension* From 20 March 2008, the EDA pension has been increased by \$15 per fortnight.

Increased non-economic loss compensation payments* From 20 March 2008, the general rate table used to assess payment amounts has been increased by 5 per cent.

Fair indexation for War Widows' Domestic Allowance* From 20 March 2008, the domestic allowance component of the widow's pension is now indexed with reference to both Consumer Price Index and male total average weekly earnings.

An increase in the Domestic Allow-

Modern Budgets are so massive and so complicated that a second look — or even a third — is advisable. Here are 10 elements of the recent budget affecting veterans.

Carers

A new carer supplement will be paid annually to replace previous one-off bonuses for carers in the veteran community. First payment was scheduled by 30 June 2009. Subsequent payments are scheduled from 1 July 2010. Partner service pensioners receiving carer allowance will get a basic bonus of \$600, plus \$600 for each person they provide care for.

Mental health

In response to Professor Dunt's independent study of suicide in the ex-service community, \$9.5 million has been committed for the implementation of the recommendations of his report. A further \$83 million has been committed in the Defence portfolio to implementing the recommendations of the Review of Mental Health Care in the ADF and Transition through Discharge.

Battlefields

\$10 million is being spent on a Western Front Interpretive Trail to better commemorate the nearly 300,000 Australians who fought on the Western Front. Options including improvements

to local museums, improved links with regional battlefield trails and the establishment of interpretive facilities are being considered.

Pharmaceuticals

\$500,000 has been allocated for a pharmaceuticals review to examine the cost of pharmaceuticals for war-caused disabilities. The review will begin later in 2009 and involve consultation with the veteran community.

Compo review

\$500,000 has been allocated for the Military Compensation Review. Submissions by organisations and individuals ended on 30 June.

University help

About 880 Veterans' Children Education Scheme and Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act Education and Training Scheme university students will receive a student start-up scholarship of \$2,254 from 2010. About 320 of these students will also receive a relocation scholarship, worth \$4,000 in the first year of study and \$1,000 each year thereafter, if they

have to move away from their family home to complete their studies.

Insurance

Long serving (current and former) ADF personnel have had their service recognised with better access to cost-effective home and contents insurance through the Defence Service Homes Insurance Scheme.

In-home care

About 3,000 veterans and war widows will benefit annually from streamlining of the assessment process for in-home care and rehabilitation appliances. Improving coordination between in-home programs will enhance services to the veteran community through better identification of needs and improved targeting of services.

Pensions overseas

Up to 2,000 war widows and DVA pensioners living in about 70 countries will benefit from changes allowing pensioners living overseas to receive their pension payment directly into overseas bank accounts, providing the country of residence has a reliable banking system.

For more information contact the Department of Veterans' Affairs on 133 254 for the cost of a local call.

ance component of the War Widow's Pension* From 20 March 2008, the domestic allowance component of the pension has been increased by \$10 a fortnight.

Remove the Simpler Super tax hike* Amendments to regulations on 2 October 2007 ensure Military Superannuation and Benefits Scheme members who are under preservation age and who take their pre-July 1999 member benefit will have the choice of applying all their available tax-free amount against their lump sum (up to the amount of their pre-July 1999 benefit) or applying the proportioning rules.

Increase access to Widows' Benefit for post-retirement marriages. The Widow's Benefit has been backdated to 1 July 2003 where an ex-serviceman or woman entered a marital relationship after 60 years of age but died within five years of the relationship's commencing. This will be made through Act of Grace payments.

Release and consult on the Military Superannuation Review report

The Government is carefully considering the report before any decisions are taken because of its importance to contributing and retired members of the ADF.

Introduce a National Transport Concessions Scheme — continuing

The Australian Government has offered almost \$50 million over four years for state and territory governments to provide concessions to more than three million Seniors Card holders who use public transport services outside their home states. All states and territories except Queensland and Western Australia are now providing concessions to interstate cardholders and discussions are continuing with

the two states yet to implement the scheme.

Provide extra financial support through 'Making Ends Meet' From 20 March 2008, Utilities Allowance for eligible pensioners was increased to \$500 per annum, paid in quarterly instalments. The Seniors Concession Allowance was also increased and the Telephone Allowance raised to help meet the cost of a home internet connection. The Secure and Sustainable Pension reforms, which were announced in the 2009–10 Budget, will simplify the complex system of allowances by combining them into a streamlined and more flexible payment paid fortnightly from 20 September 2009.

Healing our veterans both physically and mentally

Help address the cost of pharmaceuticals for war caused disabilities

Funding has been provided in the 2009–10 Budget to examine the cost of pharmaceuticals for war-caused disabilities. The review is planned to commence later in 2009 and will involve consultation with the veteran community.

Increase funding for the Applied Suicide and Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) program

An additional \$1 million has been provided for the ASIST program over four years in the 2008–09 Budget.

Implement a comprehensive ADF mental health 'Lifecycle' package

The study *Barriers to Rehabilitation*, the transition management project and family support trials are all under way. The Department of Defence is

progressing the Annual Mental Health Screen, Resilience Research and Resilience Training initiatives, which are also part of the package.

Make community mental health more "ex-service friendly" — continuing

An agreement has been formalised with the Australian Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health to develop a clinical best-practice education kit for community mental health workers.

Conduct an independent study of suicide in the ex-service community

The Independent Study [of] Suicide in the Ex-service Community conducted by Professor David Dunt was finalised in February 2009 and made 21 recommendations. The Government has accepted the 21 recommendations (one in principle). \$9.5 million has been allocated over four years for their implementation.

Introduce the Commonwealth Dental Health Program This program has not been able to commence. The Government is continuing discussions with crossbench senators to progress this commitment.

Include young ex-service people with disabilities in the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement

The new National Disability Agreement, which began on 1 January 2009, includes a commitment to ensure that younger veterans have access to specialist disability services where Veterans' Affairs programs are not available to provide them.

Review the aged care needs of veterans and "special needs"

The Government is conducting a

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