

Reporting abuse in Defence – Restorative Engagement Program

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, within its Defence Force Ombudsman jurisdiction, provides an independent, external and impartial mechanism for people to report historical and contemporary serious abuse in the Australian Defence Force (Defence). One of the responses available to a reportee is participation in the Ombudsman's Restorative Engagement Program.

The program is designed to support you, as a reportee, to tell your personal story of abuse to a senior representative from Defence in a private, facilitated meeting – a Restorative Engagement Conference. The conference provides the opportunity for Defence to acknowledge and respond to your personal story of abuse.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the process for participating in the program, as well as answering some frequently asked questions about the conference process itself.

How can I participate in the Restorative Engagement Program?

Your Liaison Officer will explain the purpose of Restorative Engagement, and work with you to identify what you would like to achieve through participation in a conference. This may occur over several conversations and may involve discussion of the possible benefits and limitations of Restorative Engagement.

If you elect to be referred to participate in the program, you and your Liaison Officer will discuss your motivations and expectations of participation in a conference and the steps involved leading up to a conference. Restorative Engagement conferences must be safe for you and the other participants. This means making sure that all participants are suitable and ready prior to a conference going ahead.

Is participation in the program confidential?

A fundamental principle of the program is that your privacy, safety and wellbeing are of paramount importance throughout participation in the program. In implementing the conference process, the provision of personal information to Defence is restricted to a *need to know basis*.

What if I am still a serving member?

If you are still serving in Defence, there are measures that can be put in place to protect your privacy and prevent other Defence personnel from knowing that you are participating in the program. Your Liaison Officer will be able to provide more information about possible arrangements that can be made to protect your privacy.

Is participation in the program voluntary?

Participation in the program is voluntary at all stages. Informed consent is sought from all participants, prior to engaging in the program, and you can choose to withdraw your consent to participate in a conference at any time.

Contact us

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ombudsman.gov.au

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Canberra ACT 2601

The Ombudsman has offices in:

- » Adelaide
- » Brisbane
- » Canberra
- » Melbourne
- » Perth
- » Sydney

Your privacy, safety and wellbeing are of paramount importance throughout participation in the program.

How long does the process take?

After a referral to the program is made, the process of setting up a conference usually takes between 10-12 weeks. This time allows for the nomination of a Defence representative, a Facilitator and for logistical arrangements to be made by the office for the pre-conference meetings and the conference itself.

If you are concerned about the length of time it may take to arrange a conference, please raise this with your Liaison Officer.

Who participates in a conference?

You, a support person (should you choose to have one), a representative from Defence and a Facilitator will be present during a conference.

The role of a support person

It is important that you are supported throughout your participation in the program by someone you know. This person may be a partner, family member, friend or even a professional support worker or counsellor (who is supporting you in a personal capacity not a professional or advocacy capacity, as they will not be remunerated by the office to attend).

You are encouraged to have a support person to support you through the process and afterwards. This involves the support person attending the pre-conference preparation meeting and the conference itself. If you elect not to have a support person, you can still participate in a conference.

The role of a Facilitator

Facilitators are trained by the Ombudsman's Restorative Engagement team specifically to deliver Restorative Engagement conferences on behalf of the Ombudsman. Their role is to assist you in preparing for the conference to ensure that your interests are the focus of the process and to facilitate the conference.

The role of the Defence representative

Defence representatives are senior Officers from across the three services within the Defence. Defence representatives are nominated by their specific Service Chiefs to participate in the program. All of whom participate in a one day briefing session on the background and purpose of the Restorative Engagement program.

The Defence representative is selected on the basis of any preferences requested by you such as gender, rank or service history. The office will nominate a Defence representative that aligns with your preferences as much as possible, however there will be no guarantee that a particular Defence representative will be available.

Participation of senior Defence Officers assists in building insight into abuse and its impacts on individuals and Defence. The insights achieved through this participation informs ongoing cultural change initiatives in Defence.

What is the pre-conference meeting?

After your Liaison Officer has referred you to the program, preparations will then begin to be made for the conference. As part of the preparation, a Facilitator will have separate meetings with you and the Defence representative before the conference.

At this pre-conference meeting, the Facilitator will discuss your readiness and understanding of the program and its aims, answer any questions you may have, and assist you to identify the issues that you may wish to raise during the conference. The pre-conference meeting will generally take around two to three hours.

The Facilitator also has a pre-conference meeting with the Defence representative to provide them with an understanding of the circumstances surrounding your experience of abuse, your motivations and expectations for participating and to answer any questions they may have about the process.

How long does a conference last?

It is estimated that the conference itself will last two to three hours. However, this is not an exact time frame and there may be some instances where a conference will go for a longer or shorter time than this.

Where will the conference take place?

The conference would take place as close as possible to your place of residence, however there will be occasions where a conference will need to be scheduled in the closest capital city. Where travel is required by you and/or your support person, the office will pay for and arrange any travel and accommodation.

Is there any financial support to assist with attending the conference?

Generally conferences will be located close to you to minimise the need for you and your support person to travel. However, if you (and your support person) require any travel or accommodation to enable you to attend the pre-conference or conference meetings, the office will make the reasonable and necessary arrangements. You (and your support person) may also be entitled to reimbursement of reasonable expenses to enable you to attend.

What are the possible outcomes of a conference?

The conference itself is the intended outcome. However, there may be occasions where a reportee and a Defence representative agree to certain things happening outside of the conference. These are called *follow up actions* and when they arise, Defence is responsible for implementing them.

What will happen after a conference?

At the conclusion of the conference the Facilitator will check in with you immediately after and then within a few days of the conference taking place. Your Liaison Officer will also contact you within a few days to talk about your experience and provide support if needed.

It is important that where possible you ensure that you have adequate personal support in place, either through your chosen support person, or with someone else you can speak with before and after the conference.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback?

You and your support person will be provided with a *feedback form* regarding your participation. Providing feedback is optional, but is an important aspect in determining whether the program is meeting its core principles and values. All information received through the feedback process is confidential and is highly appreciated.

Feedback from others about participating in the Restorative Engagement Program

Although new to the office, the Restorative Engagement Program is modelled on a similar program instituted by the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce (DART). Feedback from reportees, support people and Defence representatives about their participation in the DART Restorative Engagement Program was very positive.

Many reportees indicated that through the process, they gained a renewed sense of self that arose from being heard and acknowledged.

'The conference was one of many steps that have helped. I am in a better place than I was two years ago, 20 years ago. Relationships with kids improved, recognised stuff about myself.'

Support people reported benefits for not only the reportees, but for themselves and their relationship with their loved ones. Many reported a deeper understanding of abuse and its impacts.

'The benefit for me is that I witnessed my daughter receiving sincere, long overdue apology. This is of great significance for my family... for the first time, it was acknowledged that the effect of sexual assault and systemic abuse goes way beyond the victim and takes an enormous toll on families left to pick up the pieces.'

Reportees expressed they felt the conference process contributed to a reconciliation of their relationship with Defence as an organisation.

'The conference well surpassed my expectations (positively). The ADF representative's response, demeanour, preparatory actions and engagement was just incredible. It was almost beyond conceivable that an ADF officer could be so genuine in their recognition of poor responses and the impact this has had, and so genuine in their expression of sorrow and shame. I was blown away by the ADF's pre-conference efforts to obtain information for me, this level of thought to the process was not expected. The conference was a really unique experience, by far exceeding what I thought possible.'

The benefits for Defence representatives can also be profound. Many indicated that their participation enabled a first-hand understanding of people's experience of abuse, its long term impacts and the impacts of the institution's failure to respond appropriately, and highlighted the need to ensure lessons learned were not lost.

'A powerful and very real experience. I would suggest I am a better leader for the experience. It was an excellent experience in reminding me how relatively simple matters that could easily have been addressed can spiral very badly.'

It has taken us so long to actually stop and listen – but now we are, and we must not squander that opportunity.'

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns relating to participating in the program you are encouraged to contact a Liaison Officer during business hours (9am – 5pm AEST) on 1300 395 776 or via email at DefenceForce.Ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au.

If you are feeling distressed and need to speak to someone urgently, please call one of the 24-hour support services listed below:

Lifeline: call **13 11 14**

beyondblue: call **1300 224 636**

Open Arms - Veterans & Families Counselling: call **1800 011 046**

More information is available at ombudsman.gov.au.

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