



Fact Sheet

Restorative Engagement Program – Role of a Support Person

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (the Office), within its Defence Force Ombudsman (DFO) jurisdiction, is able to receive reports of abuse within the Australian Defence Force (ADF). As part of its response to support those who report abuse the Office offers reportees the option of participating in its Restorative Engagement Program.

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

Reportees are able to nominate a support person to enhance the process and provide support throughout their engagement in the program.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the role of the support person, as well as answering some frequently asked questions about the conference process.

What is my role in the Restorative Engagement Conference?

As a support person, you have been asked by the reportee to participate in the conference process which includes attending a pre-conference meeting and the conference itself.

The support person role is important throughout the reportee's participation in the program, as you can offer a familiar and reassuring presence. As the chosen support person, you should have: a prior and ongoing relationship with the reportee; an understanding of the abuse experienced by the reportee, and its impact; the capacity to provide support before, during and after the conference.

A support person can be a friend, family member, partner or even a professional support worker (e.g. advocate or counsellor). However, participation in a conference as a support person is strictly in a personal and voluntary capacity. No fees will be paid by this Office to professional support workers who may attend.

With the reportee's consent, a Conference Officer may contact you in relation to the conference process (e.g. dates, location of pre-conference and conference).

Who participates in a conference?

The reportee, a support person, a representative from Defence and a Facilitator will be present during a conference.

Facilitators are trained by the Office's Restorative Engagement team specifically to deliver Restorative Engagement conferences. They are highly experienced professionals who come from a range of backgrounds including social work, psychology, mediation, or law. The role of the Facilitator in the conference process is to assist both the reportee and the support person in preparing for the conference and ensuring that the reportee's interests are the focus of the conference.

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The Ombudsman has offices in:

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

The type of support you provide can take many forms, and the act of being present with the reportee is often the most important one.

Defence representatives are senior officers from any of the three services within the ADF. The Defence representatives are trained by the Office's Restorative Engagement team to prepare them for their participation. All of the Defence representatives volunteer to participate in this program.

Participation of senior Defence officers assists in building insight into abuse and its impacts on individuals and Defence. It is hoped that the insights achieved through this participation inform ongoing cultural change within Defence.

How long does a conference last?

It is estimated that the conference itself will last two to four 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.

Looking after yourself during the Restorative Engagement process

While we expect the Restorative Engagement process to be a positive one, we are aware the process can be an emotional experience. If you as the support person have any concerns during the conference or feel distressed, you are encouraged to speak with your Facilitator. Additionally, below are the contact details for services that can provide further support if these issues or feelings are not alleviated.

If you are feeling in need of support, you can contact:

Lifeline: **131 114**

Beyond Blue: **1300 224 636**

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

What is the pre-conference meeting?

As part of the preparation for a conference, a Facilitator will meet with the reportee and their support person for a 'pre-conference meeting'.

At this pre-conference meeting, the Facilitator will work with you and the reportee to build an understanding of the reportee's experience of abuse, the impacts of this and what they most want the Defence representative to hear. They will also discuss: the reportee's and support person's understanding of the program and its aims, answer any questions either person may have, and assist in identifying issues that the reportee may wish to raise during the conference. The pre-conference meeting usually lasts between two to four hours.

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

Where will the conference take place?

The conference will take place as close as possible to the reportee's 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 the reportee and the support person, our Office will pay for and arrange any travel and accommodation.

The Office will not cover the cost of travel for a support people to travel significant distances to participate in a conference. If you as the support person do not live locally to the reportee, please contact the Office to discuss whether we are able to cover travel costs.

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

Where travel is required, by either the reportee or support person for the pre-conference or conference meetings, our Office will make the reasonable and necessary travel and accommodation arrangements. Support people may also be entitled to reimbursement of reasonable expenses to enable their attendance, for

example parking fees. The Office will not pay any professional fees associated with attending a conference or pre-conference meeting.

Is participation in the program confidential?

A fundamental principle of the program is that the privacy, safety and wellbeing of all participants are of paramount importance throughout participation in the program. In implementing the conference process, the provision of personal information to Defence Response Unit (DRU) is restricted to a *need to know basis*. The DRU are a secure cell within the Command Support Branch, who report directly to the Chief of the Defence Force.

After the reportee has accepted the nominated Facilitator and Defence representative to participate in their conference, they will be provided with your full name in order to identify if they have any conflicts of interest. In addition, the Facilitator will be provided with your contact information as they may want to speak with you prior to the first pre-conference meeting.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback?

You 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 realising 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

Since the first Restorative Engagement conference was held in the second half of 2017, feedback from reportees, support people and Defence representatives about their participation in the Restorative Engagement Program has been overwhelmingly positive. This feedback reflects that participants feel well prepared, safe, and respected during the process. The following is a small selection of de-identified quotes from consenting reportees and support persons.

Quotes from reportees:

'The conference was everything I hoped it would be. I was well prepared & supported by [the facilitator] and my Defence Rep, was kind, empathetic & supportive. I feel he will use our meeting to improve the culture & attitudes in Defence'

'I feel that through this process comes the realisation that someone does care about the abuse I (and many others) underwent. I am prepared to leave it behind and consider it dealt with. I am grateful to have had this opportunity.'

'I feel lighter. What happened to me will always be there, it will never go away. But I don't feel as burdened with it as I use to.'

Quotes from support people:

'Overall, I feel the conference went very well. I felt the reportee was clearly listened to and understood and I was also allowed the opportunity as a support person to speak on the impacts of the abuse. The Defence Rep was very remorseful and expressed deep sorrow over what occurred. The facilitator led the conference expertly. She was warm and understanding and ensured all of the reportee's needs were met.'

'The conference was well co-ordinated and facilitated. Every effort was made by all involved to ensure my husband was prepared and comfortable to participate. Thanks to the conference process, my husband is now able to deal with the abuse he experienced, with the help of professionals. Unlocking the buried door is the start of a positive journey to a healthier life for my husband. Thank you!'

'[The conference] was done with respect and sensitivity. The Airforce rep was the perfect man for the job able to show empathy and was able to communicate change that has and will happen. Due to his rank and position he has the power to do so. The facilitator was excellent at the mediation to sensitively keep the meeting on track.'

Defence representatives have stated that participating in the conference process has:

- improved their understanding of abuse and its impacts for Defence;
- assisted them to better understand and respond to individuals reporting abuse in the future; and
- strengthened their resolve to implement cultural change to eliminate abuse.

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns relating to participating in the program, please contact the Restorative Engagement Team via email at REDFO@ombudsman.gov.au.

More information is available at ombudsman.gov.au.

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