

Defence Abuse Restorative Engagement Program – Role of a Support Person

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.

This program is designed to support a reportee to tell their 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 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 role of a support person is important throughout the reportee’s participation in the program, as you can offer a familiar and reassuring presence. Ideally the support person has: a prior and ongoing relationship with the reportee; an understanding of the abuse experienced by the reportee, and its impact; and has the capacity to provide support before, during and after the conference.

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

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.

Reportees are encouraged to have a support person throughout the process.

With a reportee’s consent, a Liaison Officer will contact you in relation to the conference process and any information relating to your participation (e.g. dates, location of pre-conference and conference).

Is participation in the program confidential?

A fundamental principle of the program is that everyone’s privacy, safety and wellbeing are of paramount importance. Defence has agreed that any program documents and

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The Ombudsman has offices in:

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

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information will be kept securely and confidentially and access will be strictly limited to people who have a need to know.

At the conclusion of the conference process, the Defence representative will return all program documents, including personal information in relation to the reportee and the support person, to the Facilitator, who will return them to the Office.

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. Participants may withdraw consent to participate in a conference at any time.

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 Restorative Engagement team specifically to deliver Restorative Engagement conferences on behalf of the Office. Their role is to run the conference process, assist the reportee and support person in preparing for the conference, and to ensure that the interests of the reportee are the focus of the conference.

Defence representatives are senior Officers from across the three services within Defence. Defence representatives are nominated by their respective Service Chiefs to participate in the program. All Defence representatives are trained by the Office on the background and purpose of the Restorative Engagement program.

The Defence representative is selected on the basis of any preferences requested by the reportee such as gender, rank or service history and is carefully matched to the individual reportee. Our Office will nominate a Defence representative that aligns with the reportee's preferences as much as possible, but there is 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?

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 the reportee and their support person 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 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 three 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.

How long does a conference last?

Conferences usually last two to three hours. However, this is not an exact timeframe and there may be some instances where the conference length varies.

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 or the support person, our Office will pay for and arrange any travel and accommodation.

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.

What will happen after a conference?

At the conclusion of the conference, the Facilitator will check in with both the reportee and support person. The Facilitator will also check in with the reportee within a few days of the conference taking place. The reportee's Liaison Officer will also contact the reportee within a few days to talk about their experience and provide support if needed. The Support Person can often provide useful support to the reportee in the days following the conference.

What support is available to support people after a conference?

Participation in restorative engagement conferences can be an emotional experience. This is quite normal. However, from time to time, support people may hear things about the reportee's experience of abuse that they had not previously heard. They may also find the conference raises issues for them. Where a support person has any concerns about what happened in the conference or they are feeling distressed, they are encouraged to speak with the Facilitator. Additionally, below are the contact details for services that can provide further support if these issues or feelings are not alleviated.

What if I am a serving member?

Where a support person is currently serving in Defence, the Defence Response Unit can put measures in place to assist them to attend the conference without their chain of command or other colleagues knowing. This is to protect their privacy and that of the reportee. The reportee's Liaison Officer is able to provide more information about what arrangements may be needed if identified.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback?

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

Resources

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.

Please note: This document is intended as a guide only. For this reason, the information should not be relied on as legal advice or regarded as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases. To the maximum extent permitted by the law, the Commonwealth Ombudsman is not liable to you for any loss or damage suffered as a result of reliance on this document. For the most up-to-date versions of cited Acts, please refer to the [Federal Register of Legislation](#).