

Defence Abuse – Restorative Engagement Program

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (the Office), 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 (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 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 also 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?

If your report of abuse has been found within the Office's Jurisdiction as a report of *serious abuse*, you will be provided with the opportunity to participate in the Restorative Engagement Program. Your participation in the program can only commence once your report has been assessed by our Office as being within the jurisdiction of the scheme.

Your Conference 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 Conference Officer will discuss your motivations and expectations of the process and the steps involved in the process 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.

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 distressing for some people. Let your Conference Officer know at any time if you wish to postpone or withdraw from the process.

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**

Contact us

ombudsman.gov.au

defenceforce.ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au

GPO Box 442
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.

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 the ADF, the Defence Response Unit (DRU) can put measures in place to protect your privacy and prevent other Defence personnel from knowing that you are participating in the program. We 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.

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 Conference 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 Office's Restorative Engagement team specifically to deliver Restorative Engagement conferences on behalf of the Office. Their role is to run the conference process, assist you in preparing and ensure that your interests are the focus of the proceedings.

The role of the Defence representative

Defence representatives are senior Officers from across the three services within the ADF. Defence representatives are nominated by their specific Service Chiefs to participate in the 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 closely 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 you indicate your interest in engaging with the program, our Office will be in contact with you and begin the preparations 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 between one 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 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 accommodation¹.

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.

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.

¹ Where you drive your own car, you will be re-imbursed on a cents per kilometre basis if your residence is more than 50km from the conference venue.

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 is an outstanding process with a positive outcome, it offers empathy and a mechanism for closure and a platform to be able to move forward. If I was asked by an ex-serving member the value of the conference, I would highly recommend and encourage the process.'

'It went really well. I was extremely apprehensive, nervous and unsure how I would feel during the conference. My facilitator was very nice. She made me feel at ease and explained the process clearly so I understood what to expect. The Defence Representative was also extremely nice. I found her to be very genuine and sincere. She seemed to genuinely care about my story.'

'If I knew of a stronger English word than excellent I would certainly use that word. I could not ask for two [more] professional people than my Facilitator and Defence Representative. They made the Journey worthwhile. Its important that the Navy personnel shows compassion. I was very lucky having this Defence Representative. So lucky'

'Originally I was not interested in a face to face meeting. I am now glad I did and a lot of this was due to the conversations with the facilitator and your office. Thank you for your support and help.'

Quotes from support people:

'I believe the conference was extremely positive. We were given plenty of time and encouragement to express personal thoughts, feelings and reflections. I found it to be a very safe place, where all parties spoke openly and respectfully. It is my belief that my husband was able to receive another level of healing and closure.'

'The conference was a positive experience. I am very happy that the reportee decided to contact the Defence Ombudsman in response to the ads he saw in the newspaper. That he did this and has remained engaged throughout the process to the conference is something I would not have expected given his psychological history. I have greater hope for his peace of mind for the future, thanks to this opportunity through the Ombudsman's office and for this I sincerely thank you.'

'Exceptionally well. We were well prepared beforehand by the facilitator so we knew the conference was going to be one on one for the reportee. A lot less intimidating than a tribunal setting. The Defence rep was very attentive, with total visual engagement and listened to every word. He was respectful and the reportee felt comfortable in his presence. The entire process was worth more than words can express.'

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
- positively impacted on their role as a Senior Officer in Defence.

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns relating to participating in the program, please our Office 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: **13 11 14**

Beyond Blue: **1300 224 636**

Open Arms - Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service: **1800 011 046**

More information is available at ombudsman.gov.au.

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