

FUTURE FRONTLINES

A blue and yellow helicopter is shown in flight, viewed from a low angle. It is carrying a large, red, spherical object suspended by several ropes. The helicopter is flying over a dense forest of green trees, with a layer of white mist or smoke rising from the forest. The sky is a mix of light blue and white clouds.

Strategy Papers for Australian Heroes' Wellbeing
Navigating the Transition:
First Responder Transition to Civilian Life



Future Frontlines: Strategy Papers for Australian Heroes' Well-being #2

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About UWA Defence & Security Institute

The Defence and Security Institute (DSI) is an initiative by The University of Western Australia (UWA). Hosted at UWA, the DSI unifies and focuses UWA's expertise in defence and security research, engagement, and education. Defence and security provide the foundation of our nation's sovereignty. In an era of rapidly evolving geopolitics, this critical area of national policy sits at the forefront of government and public debates.

The DSI plays a central role in helping to develop Australia's sovereign defence capabilities in WA by working with local, state, and federal governments, industry and business, research institutions and the community to help generate solutions towards a peaceful, prosperous and secure Australia and Indo-Pacific region.

About VESPIIA

The Veterans, Emergency Services & Police Industry Institute of Australia (VESPIIA) stands as the pioneering professional body in Australia, uniquely crafted to champion the tireless efforts of those who support the backbone of our nation—Veterans, Emergency Services, Police, and their families. Serving as a dedicated bastion of support, VESPIIA provides initiatives designed to uplift the organisations, committed staff, and selfless volunteers who tirelessly deliver essential support and programs to the heroes in our communities.

More than a professional body, VESPIIA represents a continuum of service, recognising that supporting those who, in turn, support our service communities is an ongoing commitment. As the institute propels forward, it remains steadfast in its dedication to creating an ecosystem where the supporters of our nation's defenders receive the backing, they need to carry out their noble work effectively and with unwavering commitment. VESPIIA, at its core, is an instrumental force in fortifying the foundation of gratitude, support, and excellence upon which our service communities thrive.

About the Frontline Futures Papers

'Future Frontlines: Papers for Australian Heroes' Well-being' is a series dedicated to advancing the well-being and resilience of our nation's veterans and first responders. In these papers, we explore cutting-edge research and innovative strategies designed to address the unique challenges faced by those who have served and continue to serve on the frontlines.

Our mission is to provide a platform for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and advocacy to ensure that the heroes who protect our communities receive the support and care they deserve. We are committed to fostering a culture of understanding and empowerment, helping our heroes thrive beyond their courageous service to our nation.



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About the Contributors

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The Future Frontlines Papers are written and edited by Shannon Hennessy, CEO of VESPIIA. Shannon has worked across ex-service organisations, defence industry, WA State Government, and WA State Parliament since 2017. Shannon's career has focused on enhancing the well-being of veterans and their families through innovative psychosocial programming and community-building initiatives. Her work also reflects a profound commitment to recognising and addressing the shared needs of defence and first response personnel and their families.

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Greg Whitehouse, a seasoned leader and manager in the Defence Community, boasts a distinguished 20-year tenure in the Australian Defence Force and a proven track record as a defence industry expert. Greg serves as the Chair of VESPIIA, underscoring his commitment to the well-being of veterans, first responders, and their families. His multifaceted leadership reflects a deep understanding of the challenges faced by those who serve and an unyielding passion for fostering resilience and empowerment. Greg is committed to resilience and empowerment, driving positive change for our nation's heroes.

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Future Frontlines Issue #2 recieved additional editing contribution by Natasha Stevens.



SUMMARY

In the second issue of VESPIIA's Future Frontlines: Strategy Papers for Australian Heroes' Well-being, we shine a spotlight on the pivotal topic of transitioning from first responder roles to civilian life. This issue features a comprehensive round table discussion with key representatives from first response, defence, and ex-service organisations. The conversation centred around the current state of transition programs within first response agencies and highlighted the diverse challenges and opportunities in this crucial area.

The discussion underscored that while some progress has been made, there remains a significant need for dedicated strategic efforts to enhance and streamline transition support. It was acknowledged that this is the initial step in a complex issue, requiring ongoing commitment and collaboration to develop effective programs that meet the needs of personnel and positively influence community outcomes.

Through personal testimonies and expert commentary, this issue offers valuable insights into the experiences of those navigating this transition and provides practical recommendations for developing robust support systems. 'Navigating the Transition' serves as a foundational resource for fostering resilience and success in civilian life for our dedicated first responders.



INTRODUCTION

The transition from active duty as a first responder to civilian life represents a significant shift, marked by both challenges and opportunities. For those who have devoted their careers to serving on the frontlines—whether in emergency services, defence, or other critical roles—the process of reintegrating into civilian society can be complex and fraught with uncertainty. Recognising the gravity of this transition, VESPIIA’s Future Frontlines Issue 2, 'Navigating the Transition: First Responder Transition to Civilian Life,' delves into this crucial subject with the aim of fostering a deeper understanding and developing actionable strategies to support our transitioning personnel.

In recent discussions, representatives from first response, defence, and ex-service organisations came together for an insightful round table discussion. This dialogue marked a pivotal first step in addressing the multi-faceted nature of the transition process. The discussion revealed that while some agencies have initiated programs to aid this transition, there remains a considerable need for more comprehensive and strategic approaches to support our personnel effectively.

This issue of Future Frontlines explores the current landscape of transition programs and provides an in-depth examination of the challenges faced by first responders as they move into civilian roles. Through expert analyses and personal stories, we aim to highlight the gaps in existing support mechanisms and propose strategic solutions to enhance these programs.

Our goal is to pave the way for more effective transition strategies that not only address the immediate needs of transitioning personnel but also contribute to their long-term success and well-being. By fostering a collaborative approach among stakeholders and leveraging collective expertise, we can create a more supportive environment for our first responders as they navigate this critical phase of their lives.

As we embark on this exploration, we remain committed to the belief that with dedicated effort and strategic planning, we can significantly improve the transition experience for those who have dedicated their lives to serving others. This paper serves as both a reflection on current practices and a call to action for the development of more robust and supportive transition programs.



DISCUSSION TOPICS

We posed two discussion topics to the group; however, throughout the afternoon, several needs and gaps in capabilities were identified beyond the scope of the initial topics.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Exploring areas where first responder agencies see room for improvement or expansion regarding members transitioning from service, whether through voluntary separation, medical discharge, or retirement, identifying what specific challenges exist, and what roles are envisioned for ex-service organisations and government in facilitating these improvements.

DEFENCE LEARNINGS

Defence and DVA have invested millions and over a decade of dedicated support and development into transition programs. how can we apply the successful strategies and lessons learned from defence and veteran organisations to address some of the gaps identified by first responder agencies? Specifically, what initiatives or programs have proven effective in the veteran community that could be adapted to support first responders during their transition? Also noting the needs of and supporting families during transition, as they are also significantly impacted during this time.



SEPARATION

When we talk about separation from service, there are three keyways in which this happens. Voluntary separation, Involuntary Separation, and Medical Separation. Each form poses significant challenges and risks to the member undergoing the separation, and their friends and family supporting them throughout the process.

It needs to be made clear, that not every member transitioning from service will have a negative experience. Especially where the member is voluntarily leaving their service, there may be limited to no negative repercussions of the transition on them or their family, especially when the member has received adequate and positive support.

With that said, policy is not created for the best-case scenario. The reality for transitioning service members, from any service, is that this can be a trying and stressful time for all involved, and where there is limited and inadequate support in place, leading to negative experiences throughout the transition process, the results can be catastrophic.

Therefore, we look a little deeper at the three types of separation and some of their unique challenges that must be addressed to mitigate and prevent the worst-case scenario for our service personnel and their families.

Voluntary Separation:

Voluntary Separation is where a member of service active chooses to leave their service. For civilians, this is the same for when you're ready for a new role, changing jobs or companies, moving up the ladder and taking on new projects is something that is second nature. The thought of this being a 'transition' process, would seem foreign, as changing jobs is something we do all the time.

For service members, while the reasoning behind making a change may be similar, for instance; moving to a new city, changing family needs, wanting a change of pace or new challenge, the reality is that leaving a service can often be more complex than changing jobs.

While voluntary separation is usually a far more positive experience, there are still significant challenges that need to be considered as we look to support the member throughout this time.

Personnel who choose to leave often face the challenge of redefining their identity outside of service. This transition from "service" to "civilian" is complex, particularly when individuals have spent years or even decades in uniformed roles.

Involuntary Separation:

Involuntary separation refers to situations where service members are required to leave their roles due to factors that may be operational, organisational, or personal, rather than by their own choice. This process can occur for a variety of reasons, such as: Operational restructuring, Contractual or policy changes and in some cases due to misconduct.

There is evidence that involuntary separation, particularly for misconduct, can increase the risk of interaction with the criminal justice system. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the U.S. has reported that veterans discharged for misconduct are disproportionately represented in the justice system.

In Australia, while comprehensive data is limited, especially where first responders are concerned, studies by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare have identified that ex-service personnel (Veterans) —particularly those discharged without sufficient support—are at higher risk of incarceration.

The pipeline from involuntary discharge to incarceration can be understood through the lens of cumulative risk. These individuals often face:

- Limited employment opportunities due to the stigma of misconduct
- Lack of mental health support
- Increased economic pressure
- Isolation and lack of social networks, as they are often cut off from the camaraderie and support structures they once had in service.

Without a structured safety net, these factors can coalesce to push individuals into criminal behaviour as a means of survival, or into environments where criminality becomes more accessible or attractive. Programs such as "Veterans Treatment Courts" in the U.S., which focus on diversion for veterans charged with crimes, have highlighted how untreated mental health and addiction issues stemming from service experiences can increase criminal justice involvement.

The stigma surrounding misconduct, especially when it involves disciplinary action, can discourage these individuals from seeking help. The combination of mental health struggles and the isolation experienced during transition significantly increases the risk of involvement in further negative behaviours, such as substance abuse or criminal activity.

This is not to say that separation as a result of misconduct should have its significance or severity downplayed or absolved as a result of their being a first responder, however, especially where a family

is involved, we must consider the potential onflow ramifications for improper transition support for the member to the civilian world, if nothing else but to help ensure the member is not at risk on reoffence.

Medical Separation:

Medical separation refers to the process by which personnel are required to leave service due to health-related conditions that prevent them from fulfilling the physical, mental, or emotional demands of their role. Unlike voluntary separation, medical separation occurs when a service member is diagnosed with a medical condition—physical or psychological—that impairs their ability to continue serving safely and effectively.

This process is typically initiated when medical assessments determine that an individual can no longer meet the required health standards for their role, despite rehabilitation efforts or treatment.

Medical separation is a necessary but sometimes difficult process for fire, emergency services, ambulance, and police personnel. It is a decision made with the individual's health and well-being in mind, ensuring that they can leave service safely and with dignity.

The experience of medical separation can be profoundly impactful, both for the individual and their family, but with the right support, it can also provide the opportunity for recovery, renewal, and a successful transition to civilian life. Central to this process is a system that provides ongoing medical care, psychological support, vocational assistance, and a sense of continued belonging to the service community.

Long-term institutionalisation and medical discharge pose significant risks. Personnel who are medically separated may face feelings of abandonment, grief, and loss of identity, with the experience being described as feeling like “my soul left me.”

Medical discharge can also leave individuals feeling disconnected from the very community that had previously supported them, particularly when they no longer feel able to engage with colleagues or the broader service family.





GRIEF

“Everything around me is my work”.

This was a phrase used in our roundtable to describe what service in a first response role is like. The hypervigilance and constancy that becomes ingrained in the member as they go throughout their service and daily lives, a switch that gets flicked on in the early days of service and can never be turned back off.

For Police, this might mean watching every entrance and exit, Fire Fighters looking for an ignition source, Paramedics ready to leap into action at an injury, no matter the size. A life of service can become consuming, always prepared to do what needs to be done. It creates a sense of identity, brings a second family, embeds them within community, so when it comes time to leave service and all of that goes away, except for the hypervigilance, it can change everything.

In our discussion, we heard from a Paramedic who has served for the majority of her working life. They gave a profound and emotional account of what it’s really like to live as a first responder, and explained what they have seen their colleagues experience through transition out of service as, grief.

A sense of loss and mourning. Grieving who they were in service, grieving who they’re leaving behind, and a fear and sense of apprehension of what comes next. “There’s

a line in the sand, you’re in, or you’re out”. This so deeply reflects the struggle our personnel experience in reconciling who they were during service with who they are expected to be after leaving.

Separation is not an isolated experience for personnel—it profoundly affects their families. Not only in support of the member going through transition, but for themselves. We often look at transition from service as something that affects only the member, neglecting the impact and change that awaits their families. While there are often many positive opportunities that may arise from transitioning from service, for example, an opportunity for a spouse to have their career take focus, children to undertake new activities, families to travel in a way they haven’t been able to before.

However, the identity of families often is just ingrained in the service of the member as well. A sense of belonging among other service families, shared comradery through experience, a community built around a shared commitment. Ongoing support for families in grieving and adapting to life after service needs to be a central component of policy.

Just as a service member may lose their community and identity, so does the family.

EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION

We've talked about the emotional and psychological effects on transition for first responders and their families, the other side of this conversation being the practical and logistical factors that also play a vital role in the overall success of transition.

Over the last several years, there has been a tremendous focus on the employment transition of Defence members, ensuring there are pathways to civilian employment available, and an understanding of the skills Veterans can bring to a workplace. However, this discussion is yet to take place at all, let alone to a similar level for first responders.

First Responders are just as broad in their skill set, work under immense stress and in increasingly critical situations throughout their service, and yet, little work has been done to acutely identify the transferability of these skills and attributes the way we have for Veterans. This also means that our first responders are transitioning into civilian employment without an understanding of their skill set themselves, or how to translate their work and experiences into a civilian context.

Our employers are also uneducated in just how much value a former first responder can bring to their business.

A focus on ensuring understanding across levels of employability signals the need for structured, staged assistance to prepare

personnel for jobs outside their specific field of service. In this area, there is much we can learn from Defence and the approach to employment transition for members, as well as the significant body of work that has been undertaken across the country by ex-service organisations to support members and educate business leaders on the value of hiring service members.

There is also a role for education institutes to play in employment transition for first responders as well, such as universities and TAFES. Recognition of prior learning is a practice that has long been in place for the Veteran cohort and should be explored for first responders.

Additionally, pathways into tertiary education, upskilling and reskilling, and further education for first responders and their families should be considered and created in step with the precedent set by Defence.

Long standing tried and tested programs like these have enabled successful transitions of Defence members for almost a decade. While with all programs for varying services, there may be some nuance and customisation that must occur to ensure the success of reaching the community and enabling their success, the framework exists and utilised properly, could mean quick implementation across the sector.





CHAPLAINCY AND SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

Throughout the session, the spiritual and emotional support offered by chaplains was a constant theme, reinforcing the critical role that our Chaplains play throughout service, and throughout transition.

It is important to note the role that the Chaplaincy plays in service and clarify that this is not a specifically a religious resource, they are an avenue for support for service personnel and their families that exists outside the confines of reporting, bound by the confidentiality provided to faith leaders.

This creates a greater sense of safety for the member to reach out and ask for help. While psychological support can be an essential and effective pathway to healing and will more often than not become a part of a care plan for a service member or family member seeking help, seeking help initially from a Chaplain can remove initial fears of the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health conditions while still in service.

These fears can include being medically downgraded and unable to work a front-line role, being judged or persecuted for their struggles, and ultimately, the fear that their seeking help will lead to being medically separated from their service.

It is true that these are pathways that come to fruition once the member reaches out for help, but we like to assume that should

these actions be taken, it is in the best interest of the member and or their families. However, stigma surrounding mental health conditions, notably among first responders still exists in force.

Hence the critical importance of the Chaplaincy services. Whether this is for faith-based and spiritual healing, values-based counselling, or simply someone trusted to go to, their role in supporting service personnel should not be understated.

When it comes to transitioning from service, their role remains just as critical and are referred to as a “conduit for support and information” during transitions. Their role in guiding personnel and families through these transitions, offering both emotional and spiritual guidance, is crucial.

However, there’s also recognition that religion may be secondary to broader emotional needs, suggesting that chaplaincy services need to continue to evolve to cater to diverse spiritual and emotional requirements.

Ensuring our Chaplains are equipped to offer these services and also ensuring service personnel are aware and able to access these services will play a critical role in the development of transition programs for first responders.

SYSTEMIC AND POLICY-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

The release of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and Suicidality gives us significant insight into the successes and failures of transition for Defence members. While each service will have its own challenges and nuance to delivering to their community, the final report can certainly be used as learning tool for first responder organisations to initiate discussion, design and implement their own transition support and services for their members.

There must be significant focus placed on the mental and physical wellbeing of the separating member, ensuring access to wrap around services for them and their families throughout and post their separation from service.

Additionally, the Royal Commission could serve as a basis for first responder agencies to conduct a whole-of-organisation review to ensure a wholistic approach to the wellbeing of first responders and their families at all stages throughout their service.

A proactive approach to career development is essential, beginning from the moment personnel enlist. By equipping members with the knowledge of their transferable skills and fostering an early understanding of civilian roles that may be accessible to them during their separation journey, service members can better manage expectations and prepare for life post-service.

This early preparation helps reduce the shock of transition and ensures a smoother path to civilian employment. Additionally, bringing the civilian workplace into the conversation is crucial, as it allows employers to better understand and value the unique

skill sets that first responders bring to their organisations, enhancing opportunities for successful reintegration.

Our roundtable also noted the recognition of first responders in comparison to Defence members through ceremonial constructs such as Medals. While no service member enlists to their service in pursuit of recognition or accolade, and surely many would scoff at the idea of receiving attention and awards, however as agencies, organisations, institutions and civilians, awards such as medals for various acts and types of service are a keyway to ensure that our responders are appropriately thanked for their service and sacrifice.

While some awards like this to exist in Policing, there is opportunity for Fire and Emergency Services, and Ambulance Services to consider and design a recognition system akin to Defence.

Finally, throughout all policy considerations, families must be a core component. The need for consistent family support to minimise disruption during separation transitions, whether voluntary, involuntary, or medical is essential. Families often absorb the emotional toll that comes with the stress, or injury, sustained during the service of their loved one.

Children may face significant challenges throughout service and transition. Policy creation must provide the support and resources to the families to enable their ability to successful transition alongside the service member, but also to be able to appropriately support the member through transition.



CONCLUSION

Separation from service—whether voluntary, involuntary, or medical—is a deeply complex process that profoundly affects not only the individual but also their families, communities, and the service institutions they leave behind. Each type of separation presents distinct yet interconnected challenges, with particular emphasis on the mental health risks, identity struggles, and uncertainty faced by those transitioning out of service roles.

The impact on families is equally significant. They often bear the emotional and psychological burden of these separations, experiencing grief, anxiety, and, in some cases, social or financial instability. The long-lasting effects on family members highlight the need for inclusive policies that provide robust support structures not just for personnel, but for their families as well.

It is essential to recognise the necessity of holistic, long-term support for transitioning personnel. This includes everything from career development programs to mental health and psychological care, ensuring that individuals can successfully reintegrate into civilian life. Support must begin well before separation and continue through the transition, with systems in place that address both immediate needs and longer-term recovery or adjustment.

Chaplaincy and spiritual guidance play a vital role in providing emotional and moral support during these transitions, particularly for those dealing with trauma or medical separation. However, there is an evolving need for secular support systems that can offer the same level of care to those who may not seek traditional religious support. These systems must be adaptable to the diverse spiritual and psychological needs of personnel and their families.

Addressing the systemic gaps in follow-up and transition support is critical to better preparing personnel and their families for post-service life. Current policies must evolve to ensure that all service members, regardless of the reason for their separation, receive the guidance and assistance they need. This includes ongoing career support, medical and mental health care, and family resources that can continue long after the initial transition.

Finally, psychological health must be placed at the centre of transition support efforts. Issues such as hypervigilance, trauma, and the pressure to upskill all contribute to the success or failure of reintegration. Comprehensive mental health programs must be made available to all transitioning personnel, with an understanding that these struggles often persist beyond the end of their service.

The process of separation from service demands a multi-faceted approach that considers the full scope of its effects—on individuals, families, and communities. Through holistic support systems, a focus on mental health, and a commitment to long-term care, service organisations can better prepare personnel for life after service, ensuring their well-being and ongoing contribution to society.

This paper represents the first of many discussions needed to develop an effective and robust framework for first responder transition. Ongoing collaboration and dialogue will be essential to creating comprehensive policies and support structures that meet the evolving needs of those who dedicate their lives to serving others.

Frontline Futures extends its gratitude to all contributors, advocates, and stakeholders who have played a vital role in shaping this discourse. As we step into the future, let these papers serve as a catalyst for continued dialogue, innovation, and unwavering commitment to the well-being of those who selflessly stand on the frontlines for the safety and prosperity of our communities and country.





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