



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

Veterans Access Network

SPEECH

Thursday, 26 February 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Speaker	Marles, Richard, MP	Question No.	

Mr MARLES (Corio) (09:54): I rise this morning to speak about the Veterans Access Network. This network was introduced under the former Labor government to meet the unique needs of our veterans communities. However, the Abbott government is proposing changes to the network service delivery model which would see the closure of a number of Veterans Access Network of offices across Victoria and New South Wales. This proposal potentially means that Geelong's Veterans Access Network office will be shut down in a matter of months. In that event, the remaining support services would be absorbed into the Geelong Centrelink customer service centre. The very real prospect that the government may close the Geelong office without a sufficient replacement has raised significant concerns in our veterans community.

The Geelong office currently services a diverse range of cases and inquiries, not only within the more central suburbs of Geelong but also throughout the entire Barwon-Southwest region. It exists as a local avenue for assistance in accessing veterans' services, and is commonly called upon by the Geelong Surf Coast Veterans Centre, Geelong RSL, the Ocean Grove Barwon Heads RSL, and the Vietnam Veterans Geelong Sub-Branch, in addition to hundreds of individual clients every year. The Geelong office staff members are the primary point of contact for any veteran who is seeking support with issues ranging from pension benefits to mental health issues. The personalised service currently delivered through the Geelong office connects veterans and war widows with a local expert in veterans' affairs entitlements who can provide them with the timely advice and support they need after military service. Furthermore, shopfront services are critical in enabling veterans and war widows to overcome the technological barriers created by having to access services online or over the phone. This community-orientated model of service delivery is designed to ensure that the Department of Veterans' Affairs is best able to support our veterans in effectively navigating the complex and often overwhelming processes for accessing the range of benefits and support services they need. Abandoning a service-delivery model which is equipped to accommodate the specific needs of Geelong's veterans will inevitably compromise accessibility and efficiency. When you take away the supports of a dedicated local service centre, you take away specialist veterans' affairs expertise in our region; you force our veterans and war widows to join the already overburdened Centrelink queues; and you risk making them feel ostracised by a system that is supposed to be giving them a helping hand. Creating such a situation would be simply unfair. Hoping that the Centrelink Geelong service centre can successfully replace the role of the Geelong veterans' affairs office is plainly wishful thinking. The Veterans Access Network offices are already being shut down in other regional areas. Geelong's veterans have been given an insight into the ramifications of shutting down the Geelong centre, which leads the president of the Vietnam Veterans Association, Rieny Nieuwenhof, to say that this is highly concerning and upsetting for many veterans. The Abbott government needs to listen to the concerns of the Geelong veterans' community, and seriously reconsider its plans to close our local Veterans Access Network office.

Deputy Speaker, if I may speak on another matter—I am sure you will allow me this indulgence: today I would like to remember that yesterday was the anniversary of the passing of Alli Murphy in our community of Geelong, something about which I spoke in this chamber a year ago today. My thoughts are very much with Stevo and the twins.