

VETERANS — EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION AND HOMELESSNESS

Motion

HON PIERRE YANG (South Metropolitan) [11.31 am] — without notice: I move —

That the Legislative Council notes the serious issues of employment transition and homelessness among veterans and commends the government for its support for the veteran community.

The Australian Defence Force, comprising the Australian Army, the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force, is tasked with defending Australia and the people of Australia. The ADF has executed this task with distinction during world wars, major conflicts, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian missions and times of natural disaster. Men and women serving or having served in the ADF have done more than their fair share to protect Australia. They of course deserve our deepest respect. When we need them, they are there for us; and when they need us, we should also be there for them.

Life in the ADF can be tough. Having served as a reserve member of the Australian Army Reserve for 10 years, I had a glimpse of how physically demanding and mentally challenging it can be at times. For instance, any member of the Army will have to go through initial training at the home of soldiers, the Army Recruit Training Centre located in Wagga Wagga. While there, one will be trained to be a competent private of the Australian Army. After my initial training, I continued with officer training and I have done other courses subsequent to that. As part of the training package, called the part time general service officer first appointment course, I went through training in different places across Australia. Initially, a cadet will be trained as a section member, so after the initial training they are deemed to be a competent private of either the Australian Army or the Army Reserve, and then they have to train for qualification as a section member as part of the officer training course. The next part of the course is training as a section second-in-command, and after that training as a section commander. The last course of my training was at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, to be a platoon commander, leading up to 30 people in a platoon situation in an infantry environment.

The reason I wanted to go through my training was to offer my experience of how difficult it can be and how demanding a job in the ADF can be. Officer training courses are based on the infantry, so I have a great deal of respect for people who are in the arms corps, infantry, armoured corps and the like. Of course, most jobs within the ADF are demanding; they can be both physically and mentally challenging. Most important of all, a job in the ADF is very different from a job in the civilian world. At times, it requires the member who is doing the job to put themselves in harm's way. Life in the ADF is structured and disciplined with a routine to follow. There is a sense of purpose to exert in one's daily activity. I vividly remember Major Geoff Craggs, one of my commanding officers during my officer training days. He taught us, during a lecture, that the Australian Army is the best small army in the world and we should be proud to be a member of the Australian Army. I still remember his words ringing in my ears. Just last week I met with him at the Victoria Cross exhibition at the Army Museum of Western Australia in Fremantle. We had a very good chat. I have to say that when I was a cadet and a trainee, I interacted differently with my instructors. It was a different feeling when I graduated and became an officer of the Australian Army Reserve and then saw my former instructors and all my colleagues in the Army Reserve. It is another different sort of feeling seeing my former colleagues who are still serving in the Army Reserve as active service persons, whereas I am now a civilian with stand-by status in the Australian Army reserve. But it was a good feeling—it was like seeing an old friend.

Some people will be lucky enough to serve in the ADF until retirement age. Others will leave of their own volition when their situation or aspirations change, and others will be medically discharged. For those who leave the ADF before retirement age, the change from military life to civilian life—or the term we use in the army is “civvy life”—can bring a lot of difficulties and challenges. Military life is structured, organised and disciplined, but in civilian life those requirements are no longer there. Such change will bring the need for new employment, which can be very difficult, as the statistics show. For many, leaving the Australian Defence Force means a prolonged period of employment transition. I would ordinarily have thought that a member of the ADF leaving the defence force would be snatched up by an employer because of their qualities—the qualities of self-discipline, dedication, focus, attention to detail and multi-tasking skills, to name a few. However, the reality is very different. A lot of former ADF members, especially those who have deployed overseas or served in the ADF for a long time, suffer a long period of employment transition. I am a bit hesitant to use the word “unemployment”, but if we have to use the phrase “unemployment rate” to give us an understanding of the scale of the issue, this is what I will do. The average national unemployment rate is five per cent. However, veterans' unemployment rate, if I have to use the term, is about 30.2 per cent and their underemployment rate is also as high as 19 per cent.

Many have found it tough to transition from military life to civilian life. There are a number of contributing factors—one is the misconception of post-traumatic stress disorder. It is a fact that it is a serious issue but it does not mean that every single veteran who has served in the ADF has PTSD; it is a contributing factor in a lot of prospective

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employers' minds that discourages them from hiring a former member of the defence force. Another contributing factor is their unfamiliarity with the civilian world. For a person who has served in the ADF for a long time, the military is a different system. It has its own language. Even though English is spoken, a lot of the words have different meanings and connotations. It is very hard for some members to communicate their skills and qualities by putting them into a CV to encourage prospective employers to consider their application favourably. A prolonged period of employment transition can have a number of impacts on physical, mental and financial health. This is a very unfortunate figure: a study says that one in 20 homeless people are ex-service people. This figure really saddens me because even though people have served their country, unfortunately, some end up on the street.

The Minister for Veterans Issues, Hon Peter Tinley, AM, is a veteran, having served Australia in the Iraq War and having spent 17 of his 25-year service in the Army with the Special Air Service regiment. I am very glad to see that the minister has been working tirelessly on a number of issues, including veterans' health, employment transition and homelessness. The government has been working closely with RSL WA on a number of fronts. For example, the state government is supporting RSL WA through funding grants from the Anzac Day Trust to establish a new veterans hub in the south west. A veterans hub is a point of contact for veterans who have served in the military. They are probably more comfortable speaking to someone who has shared a similar background in the military, and that is where they can get help. The government is also taking steps to help veterans in the employment space. Working with RSL WA, the government is also working with a not-for-profit organisation called Working Spirit to organise transition summits for veterans. The minister has launched every single summit himself, and spoken. I also want to give a shout-out to Hon Tjorn Sibma, the shadow Minister for Veterans Issues, for his extensive involvement in the issue and for his effort and work.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: It is lovely bipartisanship.

Hon PIERRE YANG: It is indeed.

Hon Tjorn Sibma: And appropriately so.

Hon PIERRE YANG: I thank Hon Tjorn Sibma for his interest in this issue and for his contribution.

I would also like to thank RSL WA, including the CEO of RSL WA, Mr John McCourt, JP, and his team for being proactive in this issue. The government is tackling the issue of homelessness. The 10-year strategy with veterans is part of that.

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [11.46 am]: First of all, I would like to thank Hon Pierre Yang for bringing on a motion today that addresses an area of social and policy neglect. I do not think that we generally as a community do enough to think about, or actually act practically, for the welfare of veterans. I think that is something to do with an appropriate focus, but probably the overwhelming focus on these issues is in the space of commemoration. The majority of the Australian community pays their respects on days like Anzac Day or Remembrance Day but for the remaining 363 days of the year, veterans issues do not feature largely in people's consciousness, unless they themselves are a veteran or are a family member of someone who is serving or has served.

I want to address a matter that is not contained in the words of the motion as put, but the member did speak to, and that is the issue of mental health. Perceptions, or I think misperceptions, about the mental health of veterans has a deleterious effect on their employment outcomes. On the one hand, there is a need to address these issues and, on the other hand, they have adopted or taken on a massive focus, which I think is actually working in some areas to a counterproductive outcome. For the record, I want to acknowledge the efforts of the Minister for Veterans Issues, Hon Peter Tinley. I have a lot of respect for Peter; in fact, I mentioned him in my maiden speech. He is continuing the work established by his predecessor in the role, Hon Joe Francis, who was this state's first Minister for Veterans. I think we can only serve the veterans communities if we adopt a bipartisan approach to welfare. There are no political benefits to derive, but I think we can work together to improve their lot.

Being the shadow minister in this space, I have the benefit of coming across veterans in the course of my duties. I am struck in particular by the experience of one constituent, who came to me I think with a degree of palpable frustration. He had spent 10 or 15 years in the Army as a commissioned officer in the Royal Australian Armoured Corps. He was a person with deep operational command experience. He had been responsible for not only the lives and welfare of people under his command but also multimillion-dollar assets. He had been responsible for delivering key performance indicators—to use the now common language—in very hostile environments. He had made the decision to transition out of the armed services and provide a new lifestyle for him and his family. He went to a university in Perth as a mature-age student and graduated with a law degree. He sought employment at a number of law chambers in the city. However, he was struck with an experience that was novel to him—namely, complete disregard and disinterest, and misapprehension of his skill sets. Some pernicious assumptions were also made about the state of his mental health. He was told two things that still stick with me. The first was, "I'm sorry, but you don't match our diversity profile." The second was, "We're a bit worried that

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we might be taking on a liability.” The clear implication was that the liability was that he might, to use his own words, “go postal”, because he had served in combat. He was absolutely floored. This is an individual who had given the majority of his adult life to serving his community in uniform, and this is the treatment that he received when he attempted to transition into the world of civilian employment. I have heard similar anecdotal stories, and friends who are very close to me have told me similar stories.

That led me to commission a brief survey. Many people in this chamber may have come across Conrad Liveris, a renowned and pretty dynamic commentator on workplace diversity and governance issues. I asked him to look into employer attitudes among the 50 largest employers in this state. I am about to publish this report, and for the benefit of the chamber, I will refer to some passages in this report. The title of the report is “Under-considered, under-utilised: Veterans in the labour market”. This report encapsulates the issues that I am raising. The report states that veterans experience an unemployment rate five or six times higher than applies in the general economy. That was also alluded to by Hon Pierre Yang. They have an underemployment rate of between 19 and 20 per cent. The report states that if veterans are lucky enough to get a job and transition into civilian employment, they experience a decrease in real salary of between 25 and 30 per cent. I am curious to know why that is the case.

In saying this, I make no reflection on the broad mentality of corporate Western Australia and corporate Australia. I just do not think they have yet turned their mind to this issue in the same way that they have turned their mind to issues such as the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; better, broader and more inclusive strategies to encourage women into senior executive positions at board level; and encompassing people in the LGBTI community. In those various diversity groups, as I will call them, veterans do not feature. I have always found that to be a rather curious omission and one that I believe we should work together to remediate. As Hon Pierre Yang observed, there is a great unknowingness about the skill sets that our soldiers, sailors and airmen, be they other ranks, non-commissioned officers or commissioned officers, can bring to the table. These people are among the most highly trained individuals in this nation. They go through regular, ongoing, career-long training. They are posted every two or three years to a new deployment, so they are flexible. They work in teams. They work with people from different cultural backgrounds. They have modern skill sets, and they had those modern skill sets 20 or 30 years ahead of where corporate Western Australia and corporate Australia are attempting to take their workforce.

In addition to making assumptions about the mental health of veterans, which I think I have already addressed, there is a strange, almost classist, misapprehension about the kinds of people who go into and then come out of service life. That works at two different ends. The first is, “The kinds of people who are in the officer corps come from the landed gentry, and they don’t need any proactive assistance in finding employment.” The other one is, I hate to say, the worst. That is the bigotry of having low expectations about people from other ranks. It is effectively, “These are dumb grunts. They’re only good for killing people. Why would I want these kinds of people in our workplace?” I am sad to say that that view—probably expressed slightly more elegantly—unfortunately resonates more clearly in the professional services space.

There are limits to what state and federal governments can do to achieve better employment outcomes for veterans. However, we can work in partnership with corporate Western Australia and corporate Australia to identify and harness this great human capital resource. We do not need to appeal to concepts such as quotas or charity. A fantastic economic argument can be made for encouraging greater uptake in the employment of these people, and I look forward to working with my colleagues in government on that.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral — Minister for Environment) [11.56 am]: It is my pleasure to say a few words on this motion on behalf of the Minister for Veterans Issues. At the outset, I thank Hon Pierre Yang for bringing the motion to our attention. I also thank Hon Tjorn Sibma for his contribution and for the way in which he is continuing to work in a collaborative fashion with the government on this issue.

We all know as members of Parliament that on 25 April each year, we show our respect for veterans and for those who have fought in and lost their lives in war. However, other than that, I am not sure that many of us take the opportunity to think about the issues that affect veterans on a daily basis and on other days throughout the year. This is a good motion to remind us of the fact that we should not think about our veterans only on that day once a year but should make sure that we continue to think about the stresses that are experienced by members of our armed forces and our servicemen and servicewomen as they seek to transition to civilian life. As Hon Tjorn Sibma pointed out, the McGowan Labor government has continued with the position of Minister for Veterans Issues that was created by the former government. Western Australia now has its second ever Minister for Veterans Issues. Queensland was the first state to have a minister for veterans; I am not sure whether other states do. I am proud that Western Australia continues to have an advocate at the cabinet table for our servicemen and servicewomen who have fought for this country.

Obviously, the role of veterans minister at the state level is mainly advocacy. The Department of Veterans Affairs is, of course, a federal institution and is headed by the federal Minister for Veterans’ Affairs. Our Minister for

Veterans Issues has been working hard over the last year and a half in which he has been in that role. He has been focused on three critical areas in which the state government can work for our veterans community. The first is veterans' health, specifically the looming peak in post-traumatic stress disorder that is inevitably heading towards us. The second is transition from life in uniform to civilian life and employment. This is especially important because of the number of younger veterans who are currently discharging from the Australian Defence Force. The third is ensuring that our veterans are not living rough. That is around tackling the difficult-to-quantify issue of veterans' homelessness, and, of course, the issue that is before us today in this motion.

A study on the state of homelessness in Australian cities that was released by the University of Western Australia's Centre for Social Impact earlier this year estimates that more than 116 000 Australians are homeless—that was the number referred to by Hon Pierre Yang—and that one in 20 could be Australian Defence Force veterans. That study has found over the past eight years that, of the 8 370 homeless people who were interviewed as part of the study, one in 20 were former military personnel. Most of those people were men, but 15 per cent were women. If we were to use the WA Alliance to End Homelessness' estimated figure of 10 000 people in Western Australia being homeless every day, we would see that the total number of homeless veterans in Western Australia could swell to 500 people. It is an awful travesty. Homelessness is a terrible tragedy, but to think that these men and women who have fought bravely and gallantly and gone across the seas to help keep us safe and with lives that we like having, come back, are discharged from their workforce and end up sleeping rough, really is a terrible thing to behold.

Of the veterans who responded to the Perth Registry Week surveys that happen every year, many declared that complex histories of hospital admissions, mental health issues, substance abuse issues, homelessness and disability have affected, and continue to affect, their lives significantly. We know it is a very complex area and I know a number of bodies of work have been done across the country. I am aware that in 2017 the Senate looked at the issue of suicide amongst our veteran community. I think since 2001, more veterans have died by suicide than have died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. That is a terrible thing to think of. We know the general numbers of veterans who we suspect are living homeless. It is certainly difficult to understand the true figures, so although it is difficult to define the problem, it can also be very difficult to find a solution.

The Minister for Veterans Issues has been working as part of the McGowan government to see how we can extend services for veterans to battle this issue. Community Housing Limited, a not-for-profit in Western Australia, has a number of properties reserved exclusively for veterans who are having issues finding accommodation. The minister, on behalf of the government, is looking at a proposal from Community Housing Limited to expand and modernise its service to the veteran community. As a government, we are very alive to the issue, as was the previous government. Our government is led by a Premier who is a veteran. We obviously have a number of other veterans around the cabinet table, as we have veterans in this place and indeed in the other place. I think it is a very good conversation for us as a Parliament to have to remind us that these people have fought for us, continue to fight for us, and have come back from some very tough places, and some people keep the demons of the horrible things they faced with them for a very long time. Peter Tinley, as the minister responsible for this area, works hard on this issue. Veterans' health, the transition to employment and the issue of veterans living rough or veterans' homelessness are three things that he will continue to spend time on in the role as minister. I know a number of other people want to make contributions, so I think I will leave my contribution there, but I again thank Hon Pierre Yang for his contribution and for bringing this debate before us, and I thank Hon Tjorn Sibma for his comments too.

HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan) [12.04 pm]: I rise to make some comments on behalf of the Greens on this motion. It is a good motion and I am glad that it has been brought on for discussion. I begin my comments by noting that in many ways WA is leading the way in research on homelessness issues, which is really important. I refer particularly to a study that came out earlier this year and has already been referred to. It was produced by the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia and is called "The State of Homelessness in Australia's Cities: A Health and Social Cost Too High 2018". That was put together in partnership with the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness. It came out with some really disturbing figures showing that veterans and Indigenous Australians were at significant risk of homelessness and sleeping rough in Australia's cities. "The State of Homelessness in Australia's Cities" report found, as has been mentioned, that one in 20 homeless people are veterans. Significantly, 43 per cent of homeless veterans have suffered from serious brain injury or head trauma and a much larger proportion of homeless veterans identified as being Indigenous—16.5 per cent, relative to the proportion of Indigenous Australians in the Australian Defence Force, which is only 1.6 per cent. This suggests that Indigenous Australian veterans may experience even greater difficulties in returning to civilian life. Homeless veterans have a higher level of educational attainment than non-veterans and on average homeless veterans are older than the rest of the population. These findings are incredibly valuable because previously this kind of data has not been available and it enables us to ensure that specific and targeted responses are developed.

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We need to look at the drivers of homelessness among veterans. I listened very carefully to the contribution by Hon Tjorn Sibma and his comments about mental health issues. Nearly half of veterans who leave the Australian Defence Force will experience a mental health disorder within five years of leaving the forces. It is very hard to transition out of the Defence Force and into the community. The all-encompassing nature of the Defence Force requires veterans to completely redefine their identities and their places in the world when they are leaving the forces. Of course, the culture of the civilian employment sector is very different. It is concerning that veterans are increasingly struggling to work out how their skills may translate. It is very different these days. I recall that my great-grandparents and my grandparents, upon returning from war, were given huge amounts of assistance as veterans and indeed were given priority for employment opportunities. We do not have these opportunities anymore. I reflect on my daughter, who is a very active member of the Army Reserve and, in addition to the extraordinary skills that she is gaining through that process, the sense of leadership and teamwork are wonderfully important qualities that should be considered beneficial to any employer. It is concerning that we do not give priority to highlighting the sorts of skills that come from working within those environments.

It is really critical that when we are talking about issues of mental health among veterans—as I have already pointed out, we are talking about a high number of veterans who are going to have mental health issues—we do not gloss over the fact that many veterans will need mental health support. We know that the most common problem is anxiety, and then it is post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks and depression. These are very real. Herein lies the wicked dilemma that we find ourselves in when trying to address mental health issues at the same time as working within a culture that stigmatises people for having mental health issues or for seeking help for those issues. Even in my own profession, the legal profession, it is a wicked problem. There is an expectation, for example, that lawyers who may be experiencing mental health issues should be open about that and seek support, but, on the other hand, if they do so, they may come adversely to the attention of the Legal Practice Board and be subject to detrimental impact. It is a big problem that we need to address across worksites as a whole. In that sense, unfortunately, veterans are not immune from the stigma that comes with mental health concerns. The solution, of course, is not to hide it under the carpet but to address those issues of stigma and point out that ultimately a person who has mental health issues and then gets support and recovers can be far better and stronger for that experience. We really need to shift community thinking about that. The other concern is that veterans are four times more likely to have an alcohol disorder when compared with personnel who are still serving, and this impacts also on the path to homelessness. As has been mentioned, veterans are more likely to take their own lives, and this is a tragedy that we must address. Ex-servicemen aged 18 to 24 are at particular risk and they are twice as likely to die by suicide than other Australian men of the same age.

Around 5 000 people leave the defence forces each year but only one in 10 seeks help from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I know from speaking to veterans that that is because they often do not feel that it is particularly helpful. This means that there is a huge unmet need out there. The mental health of veterans' family members is also impacted when a veteran is struggling. Support services need to be tailored to ensure that they recognise this and they also need to accommodate this. It is very often the partners and children who also need to be able to get support.

What is the way forward from here? It has already been mentioned that we need to ensure that we have a bipartisan approach to addressing this issue. We need to ensure that we provide wraparound support for our veterans, or at least easy access to that wraparound support for mental health services and alcohol and other drug services, and also for things such as tenancy support, and, importantly, for employment services. We need to prioritise stable, permanent housing. I acknowledge and welcome the government's \$750 000 Lotterywest grant to the WA Alliance to End Homelessness to implement its 10-year strategy and also the announcement of the government's own 10-year homelessness strategy that will expand the work being done by the alliance and will also be co-authored by the community sector and people who have experienced homelessness, who are best placed to do that. I stress the importance of the government backing those strategic directions with ongoing funding support to provide the breadth of services that are needed, because this sector is already under significant stress. Of course, the government will have to make up ground on the provision of social housing stock.

We need to acknowledge that veterans have made a huge contribution to our country. The data is clear that veterans are struggling. They are overrepresented in poor mental health and homeless statistics. We know that this is the case and that more services are needed to smooth out their transition from the forces so that these problems do not develop in the first place; or, if they do, that they are able to be treated early. Any moves to provide targeted ongoing support for veterans is to be commended.

HON COLIN TINCKNELL (South West) [12.14 pm]: I commend Hon Pierre Yang on this motion on employment transition and homelessness among veterans. We see it as a major priority for the government to continue its work in this area. This is an important debate. I am sure the motion will get complete bipartisan support in this chamber. One Nation fully supports this motion. I personally have no experience in this area, but I have

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known and worked with many vets. Since I joined this chamber just over a year and a half ago, I have seen the work that has been done and I believe that this needs to continue. In many senses, veterans are forgotten people in society. It is incumbent on us in this place to not forget them. As Hon Alison Xamon mentioned, 10 per cent of 5 000 vets who retire every year need support services. It is fortunate that we have some vets in this house and in the other place and that we keep this issue alive and in the consciousness of the public. This is an area that we can all do better at. I fully support this motion. I look forward to the contributions from other members.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [12.16 pm]: I am conscious that others want to speak on this motion on employment transition and homelessness among veterans. I acknowledge Hon Pierre Yang for bringing forward this motion today and also acknowledge his service in the Army Reserve, achieving, I believe, the rank of captain. I acknowledge also all other sitting MPs. I note that on our side we have the Premier, Minister Tinley and Minister Papalia who have served in the defence forces. I acknowledge and thank them very much for their service.

I will touch briefly on the motion. I make a special shout out to the Returned and Services League of Western Australia, which does a tremendous amount of work in this area. I know that not everybody who has served is a member of the RSL of WA, but it certainly provides good advocacy and support for veterans. When I became an MP, one of the first things I wanted to do was engage with the RSL and work with that organisation. I learned that the Agricultural Region has 40 RSL clubs. There are 10 in the midwest—in Geraldton, Dongara, Jurien Bay, Lancelin, Moora, Morawa—Gutha, Northampton, Perenjori, Three Springs—Arrino and Wubin—Dalwallinu. Quite a large area is covered. Communities such as Three Springs have a very strong military history. A large proportion of the population went to serve, especially in the two world wars in 1914 and 1939. A tremendous percentage of the people in those small regional communities went off to war and served, and that continues today.

The RSL eastern region has 20 clubs in Bakers Hill, Northam, Bencubbin, Beverley, Bruce Rock, Cunderdin, Dowerin, Esperance, Kellerberrin, Kondinin, Koolin, Lake Grace, Merredin, Pingelly, Quairading, Tammin, Toodyay, Wongan Hills, Wyalkatchem and York. In the great southern, there are eight RSL clubs at Boddington, Darkan, Dumbleyung, Gnowangerup—Borden, Katanning, Kojonup, Narrogin and Wagin. In the greater metropolitan region there are clubs at Bindoon and Brookton, which are inside my electorate. The reason I tell members this is that it provides an idea of how broad an area this is, and servicemen come from all over the state. My electorate, Agricultural Region, is a little more than 260 000 square kilometres. For about 100 000 people we have 40 Returned and Services League clubs, which gives members an idea of the spread of those who served.

I was delighted to be invited to join my local RSL club as an affiliate member. I filled out the appropriate paperwork. I do not have a strong military service history in my immediate family. My brother-in-law, Brendan Chattaway, served in the Army for a number of years, and going back a couple of generations we have a significant service record in my family. It has been a pleasure and an honour to be accepted into the Northam RSL club. I realised that people I have known for many, many years in my local community, in and around the Avon Valley, had actually served, and I had no idea that they had been in the services or had served in the Vietnam War. I learnt from that experience that many people who have served in the Australian armed services have quietly got on with their lives and either have suffered in silence or have been able to make the transition back to civilian life without making a great deal of fuss about it. I have spoken to many of those people at RSL gatherings to just have a little chat about how they found that transition, and I find that many of them I speak to are still grappling with it a little, especially people who served in Vietnam and who in my view were treated appallingly when they came back to Australia.

I am conscious that there are other members who wish to speak, but the government is working with the veterans community in many ways. It has been very well accepted by the veterans community that we have a former member of the SAS as our Minister for Veterans Issues. I was with Minister Tinley in Geraldton recently at a Returned and Services League function. It was great to see the engagement with that community, and they talked about many of the points that the honourable member has included in his motion.

It is important that the government takes the lead in being involved in the veterans community and seeing where it can help, through advocacy and in real dollar terms. Some of the issues faced by the veterans community require an investment of public money, and I think that is the least we can do. Through RSL WA and its partnership with Working Spirit—a not-for-profit organisation specialising in bringing members transitioning from defence together with prospective employers—this government has helped advocate for veterans employment transitional services. It is important that people are able to make that transition back to civilian life, and employment is the cornerstone of that.

I encourage other members to get involved with their local RSL and if the chance arises, join that organisation as an affiliate member. It gives one a great understanding of the organisation and what it is all about, and the issues

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faced by those who have returned from the services. I definitely support the motion and I commend the member for bringing it on. It is yet another fine contribution to debate in this house by Hon Pierre Yang. I think we all have a role to play in supporting our former servicemen and servicewomen when they return from the very important duties they perform for us.

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [12.22 pm]: I would like to thank Hon Pierre Yang for moving this motion; it is an excellent motion, and a timely reminder of the issues our veterans face. I will not reiterate all the matters that have been raised by other members this morning; homelessness, mental health issues and suicide have all been raised, and we understand those issues. I would like to raise another issue, and that is the issue of the transition process. When a member of the Australian Defence Force decides to leave and hands in their discharge papers, it is my understanding that they go to a discharge transition seminar—a one-off seminar where the options are explained about how they are going to move from the ADF into civilian life. After that process is completed, they are left to get on and pretty much find their own way. The veterans I speak to tell me that that process is a significant issue. Many of them joined when they were young men—17 or 18—and they leave in their mid-20s or 30s. They have never done the basic things that we all have—going to the shops, opening a bank account, getting a home loan. They need help in these basic areas, and I think that is an issue for which they need greater assistance. I acknowledge organisations like Soldier On Australia and the RSL that do some of that advocacy work. I think more needs to be done in those areas and I hope our Minister for Veterans Issues understands that issue and is helping that process move forward. I am somewhat comforted by the work that the Labor government is doing around veterans' issues.

Veterans should be rewarded better than they currently are, after leaving the defence force, with things like having a guaranteed job when they leave. This is certainly an area that I think needs to be looked at. There has to be a reward above and beyond everyday people who have not volunteered to serve their country and put their lives in danger. There has to be something else to reward them for doing that special service, such as a blanket gold card for their health needs and similar issues. I think that is something that needs to be debated at the federal level as a reward for veterans for their service to their country.

I walk around the East Metropolitan Region and see people who are homeless, living under bridges and on the streets. These people are veterans, and it is heartbreaking to see them seemingly at their wit's end, not knowing what to do. There are certain accommodation services out there, but they do not know how to get in touch with them. The government has to make sure that those services are out there, waiting for veterans, rather than them finding out about them by chance, which seems to be the case at the moment. That is all I have to say on this issue; it has all been said, and eloquently so. It is an issue that we should all take more notice of.

HON SAMANTHA ROWE (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [12.26 pm]: I, too, would like to make a brief contribution to this motion, and I thank Hon Pierre Yang for bringing it to the house. It is a rare occasion for this house to debate an issue on a Thursday morning on which we are all in violent agreement, and it is really nice when it is about an issue that is as important as the issue the honourable member has raised today. Before I make any further remarks, I will just put on the record my thanks for all the outstanding service our veterans have given to our country and our communities. They do so in such a selfless manner, and I just want to put on the record my thanks for everything they do and have done in protecting us over many, many years.

A lot of members have commented on veterans' transition into post-service employment and the problems they face when they leave the defence forces, whether they have been in the Navy, the Army or the RAAF. There have also been issues raised around homelessness, and these are very important issues that governments, both state and federal, need to take some responsibility for. Hon Stephen Dawson made some comments about what our government is doing in those areas, and Hon Tjorn Sibma has been getting involved as well. I think that is of real credit to both sides, when we work together on an issue like veterans' affairs.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is another issue that has been raised. That has an impact on the ability of many veterans to transition into employment and can often result in breakdowns in the home, which can in turn lead to homelessness. I am not sure whether any other members have already stated this, but Western Australia has a very high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder amongst veterans. I apologise if I am repeating this, but our servicemen and servicewomen are being deployed in regions such as the Middle East and have been for a long time. Apparently, one of the factors in post-traumatic stress disorder is how many tours service people go on, and the length of their tours. That is something that we as a government certainly need to be mindful of—that we in this state are dealing with veterans who are more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder.

We need to look at ways to support our veterans, and we do that through the great work of RSL WA. It does a lot of great work. It also supports organisations such as Soldier On Australia, which Hon Charles Smith referred to. It does great work assisting with not only counselling services for returned servicemen and servicewomen, but also employment transition and helping them reconnect with the community and everyday life. Members in the

Hon Pierre Yang; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Alison Xamon; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Darren West; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Samantha Rowe

chamber have commented on how difficult that is. When a 17 or 18-year-old goes straight from school and, presumably, living at home to being deployed overseas for many months and sometimes years and is then taken out of that environment, for whatever reason, whether it be through injury or whatever else, they are taken away from the only support network that they have known. Their friends—their family, if you like—are most likely still on tour somewhere fighting for our security, but they have been brought back to their home town where they do not have that support network around them. It is really important that we have organisations like Soldier On and the great RSL in our state to ensure that we reach out to them and that they know where to go for help. It sounds as though that is not always the case, so governments need to do the best they can to ensure that people know where to get help when they need it. People who fight overseas for their country and for our community should be properly supported when they come back so that they can transition into a meaningful career afterwards.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.