

VETERANS — HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Statement

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [6.53 pm]: Members may know that I have an interest in police matters, most notably in their health and welfare. I also have an interest in veterans' affairs—their health, welfare, housing needs and so on. The week before last was Veterans' Health Week. This was a nationwide event designed to assist veterans, war widows, widowers, current and ex-Australian Defence Force members and their families maintain and improve their health and wellbeing. I am sure that members agree that we all owe enormous gratitude to the men and women who serve in defence of our country and I am glad that veterans' affairs are now gaining more interest in the media in general. However, there is still plenty of work that we as a society need to do in this area, especially when it comes to the mental health of our veterans.

Members may be aware that the suicide rate for ex-serving men is much higher than the suicide rate of the general community. According to a study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare that looked at the period 2002–2014, younger ex-serving men were at higher risk of suicide death compared with all Australian men of the same age. Among ex-serving men, those aged between 18 and 24 accounted for one in six suicide deaths and had a suicide rate almost twice as high as Australian men of the same age. Needless to say, these are alarming statistics that we should all take note of. A recent federal parliamentary inquiry into suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel highlighted a range of issues which contribute to veteran suicide, self-harm and suicidal ideation. These include mental health issues, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder; homelessness; poverty and lack of income; unemployment and low job security; stress on personal relationships, and family violence; social isolation and lack of connectedness; experiences of sexual assault, bullying and harassment in the ADF; perceived maladministration within the military justice system; the side effects of mefloquine, which is an antimalarial drug, as I am sure you all know; and substance and alcohol abuse.

Our veterans should not have to suffer in silence like they do. It is important that both state and federal governments develop adequate programs to assist veteran health and wellbeing and help veterans return to civilian life. I note that the state government has indicated that it wants to see improved data collection systems in order to help identify veterans in our community and subsequently offer them more early intervention and support services. I agree that this is a very important step and I urge the state government to take tangible action and to commit funding where appropriate.