

Veterans Policy

Respecting Veterans, Honouring Service

National recognises the special status of our war veterans, and we believe New Zealand should be doing more to honour their contribution to our peace, security, freedom, and democracy.

RESPECTING VIETNAM VETERANS

The Memorandum of Understanding

National initiated the Health Select Committee inquiry into the use and effects of Agent Orange in 2003. This inquiry concluded in 2004.

Labour's response to the recommendations of the inquiry was inadequate and was labelled as such by the Vietnam veteran community. Further agitation saw the Labour Government agree to establish a Joint Working Group (JWG) to recommend a suitable compensation package. The JWG included representatives from:

- The Crown.
- The Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association (RNZRSA).
- The Ex-Vietnam Services Association (EVSA).

The JWG reported in late 2006 and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was negotiated with RNZRSA and EVSA in December of that year.

The MoU established a \$30 million compensation package for Vietnam veterans which included compensation for five prescribed medical conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange. Veterans have estimated that, as it currently stands, only 100 of the estimated 2,700 remaining Vietnam veterans will receive any direct compensation for these five medical conditions. As at April 2008, 65 ex-gratia

payments had been made to veterans, surviving spouses, and children.

Annual Medical Assessments

National agrees with the recommendation of the select committee inquiry that veterans have access to free annual medical assessments. This initiative is not included in the MoU. We estimate its cost to be a little over \$1 million a year, assuming a 75% uptake at a cost of \$500 per person.

We also support the MoU's commitment to:

- An ongoing review of international research into the effects of Agent Orange and the services provided by other governments.
- The consideration of future programmes for the children and grandchildren of Vietnam veterans.

National will:

- Endorse the Memorandum of Understanding as providing the basis for settlement of the Agent Orange issue.
- Provide Vietnam veterans with free annual comprehensive medical assessments. The estimated cost of this assessment is a little over \$1 million a year.
- Support the commitment in the MoU to an ongoing review of international research relating to the effects of exposure to Agent Orange to ensure the establishment list of Agent Orange-related illnesses is updated on a regular basis.

LISTENING TO VETERANS

It is important that veterans can express their views directly to government and be heard.

Veterans' Affairs

Over recent years there has been growing concern that Veterans' Affairs New Zealand (VANZ) is not responsive enough to the needs of veterans. For example, it doesn't know how many veterans there are in New Zealand.

Article 16 of the MoU established a review of the functions, responsibilities, structure, resources, and placement of VANZ.

The review recommended that VANZ become an operational unit of the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). This will lead to changes in its functions, responsibilities, structure and resourcing. Although a reasonable pause must be allowed for the agency to absorb these reforms after the appointment of the new general manager, veterans have a right to expect that the intentions expressed in the MoU are honoured promptly and in full. National will make sure that happens.

The Census

It is difficult, at present, to identify the extent to which New Zealanders require veterans' services. The Law Commission's review of the War Pensions Act 1954 found there are no verifiable figures on the number of veterans currently in the New Zealand population. Nor is there a verifiable figure for the number of people who have served in the NZDF or on individual deployments – except for in more recent years. Therefore, National will include questions relating to war service in the next census.

National will:

- Commit to working with veterans and their representative organisations on matters affecting veterans.
- Place VANZ on notice to perform following the recent review and changes to its structure.
- Restore questions relating to war service to the census.

RECOGNISING SERVICE

National will provide greater recognition and assistance to ageing veterans.

Veterans' Gold Card

The RNZRSA believes veterans should be recognised by all levels of government as a 'special needs group'. The Government has introduced a Veterans' Gold Card to be used to obtain discounts on products and services. Eligibility for this card is restricted to veterans who are receiving the Veteran's Pension or who have reached the qualifying age for New Zealand Superannuation. The card does not extend any special privileges to veterans over and above those available to other Gold Card recipients.

National believes that all veterans should be eligible for the Veterans' Gold Card and we will investigate including enhanced services on the card. Services could include, for example, increased priority for veterans in housing need who are waiting for Housing Corporation homes.

The New Zealand Defence Force Medal

National supports the NZRSA proposal to introduce a New Zealand Defence Force Medal to recognise all New Zealanders who have served in our regular and non-regular forces. We estimate the one-off cost of this initiative will be around \$750,000.

Veterans' Homes

Veterans' Homes provide essential care and support for our oldest veterans, and we believe they should receive greater financial support. There are three dedicated Veterans' Homes, in Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin, which we believe should be funded by an additional \$200,000 per year each.

War Pensions

National supports the current review of the War Pensions Act 1954 because we believe it will revamp and simplify the pension scheme. We commit to working with the RNZRSA and veterans to ensure the outcome of the review is a fair and equitable system that will be enduring. We agree to retain and codify the 'Reverse Onus of Proof' as the basis for determining eligibility for War Disablement Pensions, and we agree that no veteran currently in receipt of a pension should be disadvantaged by any changes.

Allowance for Gallantry Decorations

The allowance for gallantry decorations is paid to approximately 164 awardees. We believe the present allowance (\$9.30 a week) is inadequate as recognition of those who served their country with bravery.

An increase in this allowance is overdue, and National will expand it to \$30 a week.

We also believe that:

- Eligibility should be extended to include recipients of New Zealand gallantry awards since 1999.
- Eligible veterans should not have to be receiving a War Disablement Pension to receive the allowance.

These changes will increase the number of recipients of the allowance for gallantry decorations to approximately 180. We estimate the cost of these changes will be around \$200,000 per year.

National will:

- Extend eligibility for the Veterans' Gold Card to all veterans with qualifying operational service, and look to enhance the benefits available to holders of the card.
- Establish a New Zealand Defence Force Medal recognising service in both the regular and non-regular services. The estimated one-off cost is \$750,000.
- Support the review of the War Pensions Act to revamp and simplify the pension system. Retain and codify the reverse onus of proof. Ensure that no recipients of a war pension are disadvantaged by any changes.
- Provide ongoing financial support to the three dedicated Veterans' Homes. The estimated additional cost is \$600,000 per year.
- Increase the allowance for gallantry decoration holders to \$30 per week. Include the awards made since 1999 and remove the requirement for recipients to be receiving a War Disablement Pension. The estimated additional cost is \$200,000 a year.