

## Continuing the Mission:

Defining best practice living solutions for the veteran community

# What future accommodation and support options do Victoria's veterans want?



## Background

Vasey RSL Care is unique in Victoria, being the only organisation that provides both supported and independent living accommodation that prioritises those who served and their families, demonstrating our respect for the service and sacrifice they have made.

Since its earliest beginnings in 1919, the company has evolved as the needs, circumstances and ages of the ex-service community have changed.

It is important to connect with current, potential and future service users, in order to understand their present and emerging needs.

During 2021, Vasey RSL Care contracted Ellis Jones – a company that specialises in research, strategy, communications and design – to conduct a research project to obtain data and insights that will inform the design and delivery of Vasey RSL Care's future services, and, importantly, will make sure those services respond to the real needs and desires of the Victorian veteran community.

Ellis Jones gathered insights through a number of means: a desktop review, one-on-one interviews with industry experts in Australia and overseas, a survey which reached 491 people connected to the ex-service community, focus groups in Melbourne and regional Victoria and a bench-marking analysis of other organisations that support this community in other locations.

## Research Findings, Recommendations and Proposed Service Offerings

### Long-term Affordable Accommodation

#### Key Findings

- In the Wodonga, Warragul and Warrnambool focus groups, there was strong interest in additional affordable housing being made available for veterans, and operated by Vasey RSL Care as a trusted ex-service organisation.
- Veteran community connections in the regions are strong and there is an expectation that Vasey RSL Care would build relationships with existing ESO services to link in with their services.
- Consistent themes emerged in veteran preferences for accommodation design: the five most popular characteristics identified through the survey and focus groups were privacy, affordability, nature/outdoor areas, car parking and being close to family/friends. A sense of community and safety were the top two characteristics identified for their current accommodation.
- While living around other veterans/ex-service people was not important for 42% of survey respondents, 58% would consider living in a community only occupied by the ex-service community. Some respondents would prefer a mixed community of ex-service and the general public.

#### Recommendations

- Develop a strategy for establishing an integrated presence in the agreed priority regions and identify suitable properties/locations that meet place needs; build relationships of trust with local ESOs.
- Apply the learnings from this research to Vasey RSL Care's existing accommodation set up; identify opportunities for improvement in place design and service delivery.

#### Proposed Service Offerings

- Retain and upgrade existing ex-service accommodation units (266) at Cheltenham, Croydon, Frankston, Geelong, Ivanhoe and Reservoir.
- Expand into Victorian regional centres to increase capability to support the large number of veterans outside the Melbourne metropolitan area. Wodonga has already been identified as the first location for Vasey RSL Care's regional growth with its high ex-service population. The Gippsland region and Warrnambool have been identified as locations for future growth.
- Expand Vasey RSL Care's service offerings within the Melbourne metropolitan region targeting areas with high veteran demographics such as the western and northern suburbs.

## Emergency Transitional Short-Term Accommodation

### Key Findings

- There is strong international and interstate precedent for a veteran-specific homelessness response and a range of models for Vasey RSL Care to consider adopting or adapting. Most experts consulted felt that veterans' needs were distinct enough to require a specialised service.
- There is a market gap in the provision of homelessness services to veterans in Victoria whereas NSW, SA and Qld each has a veteran-specific homelessness service.
- Of the survey respondents, 13% had previously experienced homelessness and of these, two thirds experienced financial difficulties, more than half experienced mental health issues and a third experienced unemployment or job issues.
- There was strong support for Vasey RSL Care to pursue a veteran homelessness service and the proposed 'V Centre' model was very well-received by both stakeholder ESOs and veterans with lived experience of homelessness.

### Recommendations

- Develop a solid understanding of the outcomes Vasey RSL Care seeks to achieve through the V Centre homelessness program.
- Use the Ellis Jones findings to inform the design phase which will be conducted in conjunction with expert partners.
- Conduct financial modelling for a sustainable V Centre model that meets veterans' needs.
- Integrate the V Centre into the veteran community and ESO landscape, as well as mainstream services.
- Determine entry and exit requirements to achieve best outcomes for program users.

### Proposed Service Offerings

- The proposed V Centre will be located on the former site of the Vasey RSL Care Ivanhoe Aged Care Facility, which shares a boundary with the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital and its many veteran-specific services. Vasey RSL Care's Ivanhoe Ex-Service Accommodation and West Heidelberg RSL are also close by.
- The V Centre will operate a residential program with wraparound services tailored to suit each individual. On leaving the program, the supports will stay with the veteran as they move into long-term accommodation.

## Retirement Living

### Key Findings

- The research found no existing market or user preference for a 'veteran only' retirement living offering.
- There is interest in accessing retirement living among the veteran community surveyed. Among survey respondent who were 50 or over, a quarter said they were considering retirement living.
- Community, health, safety, transport and access are highly valued by research participants: future-proofing homes for ageing residents – single storey, ramps, lifts, etc. Requirements were access to medical and allied health services, parking for cars, motor homes, trailers was seen as an advantage and an environment that promoted wellbeing and independence.

### Recommendations

- A Vasey RSL Care retirement living option should comprise a mixed cohort of veterans/ex-service and the general public to best meet user preferences and ensure financial sustainability.
- It should be located close by/adjacent to an aged care facility to best meet user preferences and deliver efficiencies: co-location is the preference for the majority of survey respondents and is the recommendation from experts, and the approach taken by similar organisations.
- Further market research into demographics and demand will be required in the Local Government Area(s) identified by Vasey RSL Care as a possible first site.

### Proposed Service Offerings

- Before proceeding with development of this service offering, further research will be carried out to better understand how retirement living will fit into the company's overall accommodation strategy and to help determine where the organisation will position itself in the market.

