



Trainee advocates Karen Holmes and Craig Bolwell, administrator Kevin Gray, co-ordinator Paul Blackwell and advocate Shane O'Keefe. Picture: Rodney Braithwaite

Ready and willing to help

Navigating the complex legislation that deals with veterans' entitlements can be challenging – and that's where the volunteers from Goulburn Valley Veterans Centre can help.

The dedicated team operates autonomously from the Shepparton RSL, but receives valuable financial support from the club to carry out this important work.

Level two advocate and centre co-ordinator Paul Blackwell said many veterans were unaware of the assistance they were entitled to, and for some individuals, dealing with the various government agencies was confusing and increased stress.

"Anyone and everyone who has served can come in here and we will help them," Paul said.

Liaising primarily with the Department of Defence and Department of Veterans Affairs, the team can assist with accessing service and medical records, obtain documentation and process claims.

Three different acts of parliament – the Veterans Entitlements Act, Defence Rehabilitation and Compensation Act, Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act – govern pensions and compensation, and each has a multitude of layers within.

"People are unsure what they are entitled to and we can help them with almost anything from claiming for injury or illness that happened during their time in the defence force, to assisting partners of

deceased veterans to access pensions," Paul said.

"We offer support and advice and can refer them to welfare if they need financial assistance.

"We get a bit of a thrill from helping the veterans get something they are entitled to."

The centre is building relationships with a team of psychologists and medical professionals to support veterans, and can organise DVA doctors to liaise directly with veterans' local doctors to work through cumbersome paperwork.

Veterans within a 150 km radius of Shepparton – including those living in Mansfield, Tocumwal, Benalla, Yea and Rochester – access the services the centre offers.

"I would encourage vets to come in and get advice before attempting any online claims, once that information is submitted it can be very difficult to alter if it's incorrect," Paul said.

After 20 years in the military, including two tours of Vietnam, Paul worked in Australian Protective Services with stints at Melbourne Airport and Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre before moving into advocacy about 12 years ago.

He has been at the Shepparton centre for two-and-a-half years.

"Each service has its own dialect so to speak, so we're fortunate here that our team of advocates have combined years of experience – 70 in the military, 34 in the Navy and 22 in the Air Force," Paul said.

"Someone will always understand the terminology."

The centre has recently received an \$8000 Best Funding Building Excellence in Support and Training grant to cover some maintenance costs and reimburse the volunteer advocates for travel expenses.

Team members are: Paul Blackwell (advocate level two), Shane O'Keefe (advocate level one in training for advocate level two), Marcia Glenwright (advocate/investigator), Craig Bolwell (in training for advocate level one), Karen Holmes (in training for advocate level one), Chrisdeon Roberts (in training for advocate level one), Veronica Blackwell (front desk administration), Ted Ball (front desk administration) and Kevin Gray (administration).

Goulburn Valley Veterans Centre operates Monday to Thursday from 10 am to 4 pm. Phone 5831 7220.

Services provided

- **Assistance with all Department of Veterans Affairs pensions.**
- **Proof of service – discharge papers.**
- **Proof of defence or war-caused injury.**
- **Bereavement assistance.**
- **War widow pensions.**
- **Compensation.**
- **Income support.**
- **Health care assistance.**
- **Mental health.**
- **Rehabilitation.**
- **Service medals.**
- **Transport advice.**