

Reporting abuse in Defence

Frequently Asked Questions

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (the Office), within its Defence Force Ombudsman (DFO) jurisdiction, is able to receive reports of serious abuse within the Australian Defence Force (Defence). This provides an independent, external, impartial and confidential mechanism to report serious abuse for those who feel unable, for whatever reason, to access Defence’s internal mechanisms. Serious abuse means sexual abuse, serious physical abuse or serious bullying or harassment which occurred between two (or more) people who were employed in Defence at the time.

Our Frequently Asked Questions aim to assist reportees, or individuals acting on behalf of reportees, to engage with our Office and understand the options available to them.

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Reporting serious abuse in Defence

Who can make a report?

The Ombudsman can receive a report of serious abuse in Defence by a reportee who was, at the time the abuse is alleged to have occurred:

- a member of the Australian Defence Force (Defence), or
- an Australian Public Service employee deployed outside Australia, or
- a Defence contractor engaged to provide services outside Australia, either in connection with an operation of the Defence Force or for the purpose of capacity building or peacekeeping functions by the Defence Force.

Can I make a report on behalf of someone else?

A report of abuse may be made by a reportee, or by another person (an ‘authorised representative’) on their behalf. A reportee’s authorised representative is someone who the Ombudsman is satisfied is:

- a trustee, guardian or administrator appointed under legislation, or by a court or tribunal order
- the holder of a power of attorney
- a legal representative
- someone who has legal or written authority (general or specific) to represent the reportee in relation to their report of abuse, or
- someone who the DFO is otherwise satisfied is authorised to make a report on behalf of the reportee.

The reportee will need to complete our *Permission for another person to act on my behalf* form, which can be accessed on our [website](#).

How do I make a report?

To report serious abuse to the Ombudsman, you will need to complete a Reporting Abuse Form, which is in the form of a statutory declaration and is available on our [website](#). We may contact you in relation to your report and you may also be asked to provide further information or clarification where required.

If you need assistance completing the form, please contact us on **1300 395 776**.

Can I make a report anonymously?

Yes. You can make a report and not provide your personal details. The information in your report can assist in identifying systemic issues or areas of concern in Defence. However, it will not be possible to progress an assessment of your report without certain information, including your identifying details.

I complained to the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce (DART)—can I also report my abuse to the DFO?

The Defence Force Ombudsman cannot respond to a report of abuse if it was dealt with by the DART. However, if you have new information you did not report to the DART, we will consider this information. If you contacted the DART after the cut-off date for complaints (31 May 2013) you can make a report of abuse to us. You can also report abuse which occurred after 11 April 2011 (abuse that was outside the DART’s terms of reference), even if you had previously reported that abuse to DART.

I suffered abuse while employed by Defence, but I do not know the identity of the person(s) who abused me. Is it still possible for me to apply?

Yes. It is not essential that you know the identity of the person(s) who abused you.

However, you should provide as much information as possible in your report about the circumstances of the abuse, and the reasons you do not know the identity of the person(s) who abused you. For example, you may have not seen the face(s) of the person(s) who abused you, or you may have forgotten the name or the spelling of the name of the person(s) who abused you as the abuse occurred a long time ago.

Any information you can provide will help the Ombudsman to assess your report.

My report of abuse happened a very long time ago and there were no witnesses. Can I still make a report of abuse?

Yes. We will consider all reports of abuse, no matter how old. We also understand that current or former serving members of Defence may not have records or evidence to prove the abuse occurred. We can accept reports of abuse we consider to be reasonably likely to have occurred.

The Ombudsman’s jurisdiction

The Ombudsman may take appropriate action in response to reports if satisfied it constitutes *serious abuse* which are *reasonably likely* to have occurred.

What is ‘serious abuse’?

‘Serious abuse’ is defined as sexual abuse, serious physical abuse and serious bullying and harassment. All reports will be assessed to determine whether the reported abuse meets this definition.

Serious physical abuse or *serious* bullying and harassment is conduct which is significant and consequential. It is the conduct alleged which must be significant, rather than the effect on the person on whom it is inflicted. The assessment of seriousness is an objective test and abuse will be determined to be serious where a reasonable person would see the conduct as sufficiently significant in all the circumstances.

In assessing seriousness, the Ombudsman will consider whether the conduct:

- involves a series of incidents which indicate a course of conduct
- is inflicted by officials acting in concert with others
- involves actual bodily harm being inflicted
- appears to include premeditation or consciousness of wrongdoing, and

- amounts to sexual harassment or discrimination on the basis of an attribute recognised by Australian anti-discrimination law.

The factors outlined above are not elements of a definition that must be satisfied in each instance, but rather factors to be considered as part of an objective assessment of each report.

What does ‘reasonably likelihood’ mean?

Reasonable likelihood is below the civil standard of proof (‘on the balance of probabilities’). It involves the concept that reasonable inquiries have been made to form the belief.

The Ombudsman will seek, and consider, any of the following that may be applicable to individual reports:

- further information from a reportee, such as medical records or police or Defence reports
- trend information about abuse which occurred at particular locations and times, and
- any information provided by Defence.

However, having regard to the nature of the abuse, an absence of any further or corroborating information will not prevent the Ombudsman from being satisfied it was reasonably likely to have occurred.

I experienced domestic violence in my relationship with another serving member. Is this within your jurisdiction?

Matters of domestic violence are not within the Ombudsman’s jurisdiction. The Ombudsman’s jurisdiction is directed to a person’s conduct in the workplace rather than a domestic relationship. The jurisdiction does not cover conduct which occurs within domestic relationships, or in a social setting disconnected from the workplace, even when both parties are members of Defence.

Service Police can take a report of a domestic violence incident. In addition, the Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office (SeMPRO) can offer support to a member who has experienced domestic violence that involves an element of sexual misconduct.

Process

How will my report be assessed?

Each report of abuse will be assessed as quickly as possible. We can accept reports where we are satisfied:

- the report constitutes serious abuse
- the abuse is reasonably likely to have occurred
- you were, at the time of the alleged abuse, an employee of Defence
- the alleged abuser was an employee of Defence, and
- there is a connection between the alleged abuse and your employment in Defence.

We will notify you of the outcome of our assessment process and whether we have accepted your report.

Will information be provided to Defence as part of this process?

Yes. As part of the process, we will seek your consent to provide information about your report of abuse to Defence, so that it can provide information to assist us with the assessment process.

We will only do so with your consent, after close and informed consultation. You may withdraw your consent at any time and we will cease taking any further action. Not consenting, or withdrawing consent, may limit our ability to consider your matter further, although it does not prohibit you from providing your consent at a later time.

I am still serving in Defence—will the Defence Force Ombudsman take any special precautions to make sure my privacy is protected?

The Ombudsman is aware of the additional sensitivities around requesting information from Defence in relation to reportees who are currently serving and will not request any information from Defence without first contacting you and obtaining your consent.

Our Privacy Policy is available on our [website](#).

We will keep your personal information confidential, except for limited circumstances when required by law or Parliament. We will only provide limited necessary information to Defence in order to obtain your relevant records from Defence.

This information will be provided directly to the Defence Response Unit (DRU), a secure cell within the Command Support Branch of the Australian Defence Force Headquarters which reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Force. The DRU treats this information with the strictest confidence and it will only be viewed by staff within the DRU.

What if I disagree with the outcome of the assessment process?

You may write to us to request a review of the assessment outcome. You may choose to provide further information in support of your request for a review.

Our policy is that we will review a decision only once.

Does the Ombudsman investigate my report of abuse and make a finding?

No. We do not investigate the incident(s) of abuse. However, with your consent we can refer your report to Defence or another agency such as the Australian Defence Force Investigative Service or the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force. These organisations are able to investigate incidents and make findings of guilt or innocence.

What is the effect of the Ombudsman accepting my report of serious abuse?

This enables us to take further appropriate actions, in consultation with you. Actions may include referrals to [counselling](#), participation in our [restorative engagement program](#), provision of more detailed information about the abuse to Defence for its further consideration, and, in some circumstances, recommending to Defence that it make a [reparation payment](#).

However, our acceptance of the report does not amount to a finding of fact or definitive proof the abuse occurred. In particular, our acceptance of a report does not necessarily meet the legal standard of proof required for other government agencies (such as the Department of Veterans' Affairs).

Can the Defence Force Ombudsman investigate other Defence action?

Yes. The Defence Force Ombudsman has administrative jurisdiction to investigate complaints from serving or former members of the Australian Defence Force (Defence) about Defence agencies.

Defence agencies include: the Australian Defence Force, Department of Defence, Department of Veterans' Affairs and Defence Housing Australia.

A report of abuse may also give rise to administrative issues which could be investigated under the administrative jurisdiction of the Defence Force Ombudsman. This will only occur in circumstances where the Ombudsman considers it appropriate to do so and where the reportee consents for this to occur.

Need more information?

Fact sheets about the restorative engagement program, counselling referrals and reparation payments are available on our [website](#).

We invite you to email us at defenceforce.ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au with any questions you have that are not addressed above.

If you have any questions or concerns you are encouraged to contact a Liaison Officer during business hours (9am – 5pm AEST) on **1300 395 776** or via email at defenceforce.ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au.

If you are feeling distressed and need to speak to someone urgently, please call one of the 24-hour support services listed below:

Lifeline: **131 114** | Beyondblue: **1300 224 636** | Veterans and Veterans' Families Counselling Service: **1800 011 046**