Open Arms Symposium Abstracts

Presentation Abstracts

Keynote Address: The Canadian Military Sexual Trauma Community of Practice (MSTCoP): A practical framework for working together to address Military Sexual Trauma

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In this talk, Dr. McKinnon will provide an overview of the activities of the Canadian Military Sexual Trauma Community of Practice (MSTCoP), which draws together people with lived experience of military sexual trauma (MST), serving military members, Veterans, public servants, clinicians, and researchers to address military sexual trauma and reduce its deleterious impact. Funded, in part, by a grant from the Canadian Department of National Defence and Co-Chaired by Dr. Alexandra Heber, Chief of Psychiatry of Veterans Affairs Canada, the MSTCoP has engaged in key activities, including: i) the hosting of regular meetings that have provided an important avenue for information exchange and feedback to agencies such as the Canadian Armed Forces; ii) the organization of online national symposia on MST that drew large audiences; iii) the co-design of a Trauma-Informed Leadership Workshop for leaders at all levels of the Canadian Armed Forces, delivered on Canadian Armed Forces bases across the country; and iv) implementation of a program of research and scholarship that addresses key issues related to MST. Similar models have the potential to facilitate efforts to address MST in our Five Eyes colleague-nations. In addition to reviewing the activities of the MST CoP, Dr. McKinnon will highlight key insights concerning MST and its impact, including barriers to access care, as well as critical lessons learned that may influence implementation in other settings beyond Canada.

Honouring the Past, Shaping the Future

How the legacy of Vietnam veterans continues to guide the evolution of Open Arms and its Model of Care.

This presentation traces the evolution of Open Arms from Vietnam veteran-led advocacy to a national counselling service supporting veterans and their families. It explores how the founding values of mateship, advocacy and lived experience continue to shape the service's military-aware, trauma-informed Model of Care, honouring the past while responding to the changing needs of successive generations.

Lived Experience - why it matters to Open Arms

Veterans and families of veterans help shape care that feels safe, relevant and connected through lived experience and lived expertise.

This presentation explores how veterans and families of veterans have and continue to contribute to the Open Arms Model of Care, helping shape safe, relevant services that respect individual choice and recovery goals. It outlines contributions through the Community and Peer Program, designated lived experience roles within Governance functions, the Veteran and Family Reference Group, and online peer forums. These approaches aim to strengthen trust and connection, support hope and recovery, and improve access to care. A client account illustrates the value of feeling understood by accessing support from our Lived Experience Workforce, while ongoing feedback and evaluation remain essential to assessing how lived experience involvement continues to improve care.

Impact for the Next Generation

Children of veterans have their own stories of military service, even though they are not the ones who signed up. The Children of Veterans Assembly gave us a chance to hear some of the stories directly, but the real test is what we do with what we've heard. Annabelle will share how the Impact Measurement Framework helps us follow that thread, looking for the changes that happened next and, ultimately, whether they make a meaningful difference for children, young people and families of veterans.

South Australian Veterans Court

Supporting Veterans and their Families through the Courts. Multi-agency Collaboration - Federal/State/Judiciary

This presentation introduces the South Australian Veterans Court, Australia's first dedicated therapeutic sentencing court for Australian Defence Force veterans. It explores how collaboration between the judiciary, correctional services, DVA/Open Arms and community partners supports a veteran-centred, trauma-informed approach to justice. The session outlines the court's model, including tailored mental health treatment and peer support, and explains how participants' engagement informs sentencing. Early feedback highlights positive experiences for veterans and reported benefits for their families, with formal evaluation planned after 12 months of operation. The presentation also considers the initiative's potential to inform similar approaches across Australia.

Beyond the Referral

Building Partnerships for Veteran Wellbeing

The presentation reflects on what this approach can teach us about partnership, service integration, and the role of research in improving veteran wellbeing. Veteran wellbeing does not sit neatly within a single service, profession or institution. Veterans experiencing distress may encounter police, health services, veteran organisations and community supports, often at moments when the connections between these systems matter as much as the individual services themselves. This presentation uses the Australian Veterans Wellbeing Pilot as a case study in building partnerships across research, policing and veteran services. The pilot is developing and testing a co-designed training and referral model with police, initially in the ACT, focused on military and veteran culture, veterans in crisis, trauma-informed engagement, de-escalation and pathways into appropriate support. But the pilot also raises a broader question: what does it take to turn research and partnership into a functioning pathway of care? Rather than treating translation as moving knowledge from researchers to practitioners, the project treats knowledge as something produced between veterans, researchers, police and services. The aim is not to turn police into mental health practitioners, but to improve the quality of the encounter and create stronger connections between veterans and the services already designed to support them.

Moral Injury: Definition, Determination and Delivery

Defining MI, Determining MI and Delivery of MIU programs

This presentation will provide research with respect to (a) defining moral injury, (b) the various measurement scales for determining moral injury, and (c) the ways we can approach delivery of support to veterans experiencing moral injury, particularly with regard to the Open Arms Model of Care.

Building an understanding of Military Sexual Trauma from stakeholder engagement to strengthening support, practice and pathways to care in Open Arms

The benefits of engaging stakeholders to strengthen Military Sexual Trauma evidence-informed support pathways in mental health service delivery.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) can have profound and lasting impacts on veterans and families of veterans. This presentation explores how Open Arms is strengthening its response through evidence, lived experience, stakeholder engagement and international collaboration. Drawing on shared learning, the session highlights insights into military culture, language and pathways to support. It considers how stakeholder engagement can inform the Australian veteran and family context to strengthen workforce capability, trauma-informed and military-aware practice, and pathways to care. The presentation demonstrates how evidence, partnership and shared learning can support meaningful and sustainable service improvement.

Tomorrow's Impact: Future Opportunities for our Model of Care

This plenary session will look to the future, exploring opportunities to build on the refreshed Open Arms Model of Care and strengthen its impact over time. The discussion will consider the opportunities presented by digital mental health, stronger pathways to mental health care, innovation in how and where we deliver services, and new ways to expand our reach and respond to the evolving needs of veterans and families.