


# SERVICES AND PROGRAM ENTRY

**CATEGORY: General**

**ENTRY TITLE: Wellbeing for Australian Veterans and Emergency Services (WAVES), Invictus Pathways Program (IPP).**

**NAME OF APPLICANT: WAVES/IPP Team, University of South Australia (UniSA).**

**ORGANISATION: University of South Australia (UniSA).**

**Additional Information about Entry.**

The impact of military service is increasingly acknowledged as a key determinant of physical and psychological wellbeing for Veterans and subsequently, their families (1-5). Beyond the obvious health impacts, such as physical impairment or mental ill health, some Veterans struggle to reintegrate into civilian society when they leave service (2, 6). This can lead to disengagement and isolation from their community, which can be further detrimental to physical and psychological health.
Strategies designed to support Veterans and their families are important to ensure a strong and cohesive family unit that is physically active, socially engaged, and physically and psychologically healthy (4). One approach to supporting Veterans and by extension, their families, to achieve this is through engagement and participation in community-based adaptive sport and competitive sporting opportunities, such as the Invictus Games and the Warrior Games.

To facilitate the involvement of current and former serving personnel in such opportunities, the Invictus Pathways Program (IPP) was co-developed in 2017 through a collaboration between the University of South Australia (UniSA) and The Road Home, now Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA), a charity of The Hospital Research Foundation, motivated by the spirit of the Invictus Games, to mobilise the benefits of sport to aid physical, psychological, and social wellbeing. Recognition of the need for a holistic approach to supporting Veterans and First Responders, and by extension their broader family unit, led to the expansion of the Invictus Pathways Program (IPP) to the Wellbeing for Australian Veterans and Emergency Services (WAVES) Program.

The IPP, now sitting within WAVES, is a service program delivered by students completing allied health and exercise science degrees within UniSA's Allied Health and Human Performance academic unit. It is intended to support and improve wellbeing and facilitate post-traumatic growth among participants, who are living with physical and mental health injuries and conditions, using the power of exercise and adaptive sport. The IPP is comprised of two distinct but complementary programs: an Exercise and Performance Program (EaPP) and a Community Adaptive Sport Program (CASP).

Between 2017 and 2020, the EaPP was delivered only to participating former and current Australian Defence Force (ADF) service personnel by third and fourth year UniSA allied health students, who were supervised in their placement within the IPP by appropriately qualified university staff. Embedded within UniSA's curriculum, the IPP is intended to provide valuable interdisciplinary learning experiences for students across several disciplines, including physiotherapy, podiatry, exercise physiology, exercise science, and since 2020, occupational therapy. Students are recruited into the IPP Student Placement Program to complete a mandatory 140-hours of practicum placement over a period of 12 months. From a student perspective, engagement in the IPP provides a unique learning opportunity with a population of participants who have varied life experiences, as well as ongoing physical and psychological injuries. For participants, the EaPP provides opportunities to engage in physical activity, set and achieve performance and competitive goals, and access to allied health support, with a long-term aim of supporting community reintegration. Beyond this, is the capacity of participants to 'continue to serve' by supporting student education and health professional development. *(References in Appendix)*

**Award criterion.**

**1. Evidence of a significant contribution to the field of mental health on a local, state or national level.**

*'This program saves lives'* was a comment that came from a Veteran in the audience of a recent symposium (March 2024), where information about the IPP and its impact since inception in 2017 was presented to an audience of approximately 100 stakeholders. The IPP has made a significant contribution to the field of mental health for Veterans, First Responders and by extension, their family support network, in South Australia. The Program has been demonstrated to positively impact physical, psychological and social wellbeing for participants, creating a sense of belonging and achievement, as well as an opportunity to 'give back'. The findings from the evaluation of the early years of the Program have been used to inform submissions to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and the South Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into mental health support for SA Police members and their families. IPP has also been acknowledged as an exemplar program by the Australian Parliament's Senate Inquiry into Adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force Veterans.

Due to the identified benefits of participation, ADF-associated organisations, Australian Federal Police (AFP), SAPOL, Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS), Ambulance Employees Association South Australia, Jamie Larcombe Centre, and prominent local mental health practitioners actively refer their members to the Program, in addition to word of mouth from current and previous participants who identify the value of the program for their peers and social networks.

**2. Evidence of innovation and/or recognised best practice.**

WAVES/IPP is both innovative, being at the service delivery/student education nexus and has been recognised as an exemplar program by the Australian Senate.

The EaPP component of WAVES/IPP is innovative in that it is a 'first-of-its-kind' program in Australia. The EaPP seeks to support the psychological wellbeing of its participants through engagement in physical activity, while meeting the core business of a university: educating students to be future health professionals. One-on-one exercise programs are delivered by undergraduate allied health students in their 3$^{rd}$ and 4$^{th}$ years, under the supervision of appropriately qualified university staff working within the WAVES Program. Embedded within UniSA's curriculum, the IPP is intended to provide valuable interdisciplinary learning experiences for students across several disciplines, including physiotherapy, podiatry, exercise physiology, exercise science, and since 2020, occupational therapy. Students are recruited into the IPP Student Placement Program to complete a mandatory 140-hours of practicum placement over a period of 12 months. From a student perspective, engagement in the IPP provides a unique learning opportunity with a population of participants who have varied life experiences, as well as ongoing physical and psychological injuries. For participants, the EaPP provides opportunities to engage in physical activity, set and achieve performance and competitive goals, and access to allied health support, with a long-term aim of supporting community reintegration. Beyond this is the reciprocal relationship

between students and participants, whereby the participants feel that they 'continue to serve' by supporting the education and development of students as future health professionals.

The IPP has been recognised internationally, with Martin Colclough OBE, Programme Advisory Board Member, Invictus: Endeavour Programme stating: *When you think there are no new ideas in the field of health, wellbeing and sports programmes for ill and injured military personnel, along comes something novel to blow this out of the water. The work at UniSA's Invictus Pathways Program supported by MESHA, is truly world leading and including an occupational therapy capability is a great enhancement to this inter-disciplinary student-led program.*

In 2023, the Australian Parliament's Senate Inquiry into Adaptive sports programs for Australian Defence Force Veterans recognised the IPP as an exemplar program. Recommendation 5, 3.28 in the final report stated: *The committee recommends that the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs assess the benefit of directing some existing funding for rehabilitation programs for veterans (including those still serving) to structured programs such as the Invictus Pathways Program where sport is used as a vehicle to provide physical and mental support to veterans, and making such programs more accessible to veterans across Australia.*

In 2023, the Program team trialled Connecting with People (CwP) Suicide Awareness training with allied health students placed in IPP. The purpose of this was to ensure that students working with participants were better equipped to support the participants they work closely with but that they are also equipped with skills to support their own wellbeing during placement and as they commence their careers as health professionals. This includes having the skills to develop a safety plan, including listing who they would contact in times of need. Evaluation of this training indicated that it was perceived to be beneficial for students, and it increased their confidence in working with this population. Students also felt that they had learned skills to support their own wellbeing.

**3. Evidence of participation of mental health consumers in the planning, implementation and evaluation of mental health service delivery. Evidence of prioritising increased level of engagement and influence of consumers and where higher level participation such as authentic co-design is highly favoured. There may be exceptions to the involvement of mental health consumers. Some entries may reasonably explain any particular circumstances where the involvement of mental health consumers is different or limited.**

The participants are consistently involved in all aspects of WAVES/IPP, to ensure that their needs are met. Ongoing evaluation, through completion of surveys at participants' baseline, six month and 12-month timepoints, and six-monthly thereafter, enables the research team to monitor process and to feedback to the Program team to make amendments and refinements to program offerings as required.

One example of the co-design approach to this program sits within the development of a transition pathway that is intended to support participants as they exit the one-

on-one student-delivered exercise component specifically. While community reintegration is an intended outcome of the IPP, evaluation of the program indicated that some participants felt a sense of loss akin to that of leaving the military when they left the program. They no longer had the consistency or accountability of the student training, nor the sense of belonging that the program offered, and for some this further exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions. Currently the focus of PhD research, development of the transition pathway and appropriate supports for participants leaving the program will be informed by consultation with participants and members of their family support network through survey, focus groups and interviews. We are aware of the impact of service on family members and the important role that family members play in supporting Veterans and First Responders. As such, their inclusion in this process is imperative. A stakeholder group, comprised of representatives of program participants and their families, has been involved in the co-design of surveys, focus group and interview questions. With these data currently being analysed, the Stakeholder Group will contribute to the sense making of the data and the development of recommendations for a transition pathway that better supports participants to exit the EaPP and reintegrate in community activities.

4. **Evidence of partnerships and linkages with all key stakeholders (collaboration for continuity between organisations).**

WAVES/IPP is funded by UniSA and Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA), a charity of The Hospital Research Foundation. In 2024, MESHA will provide Defence and First Responder cultural awareness training to new placement students to enhance their capacity to work with Program participants.

WAVES/IPP has partnerships and linkages with the Australian Defence Force (ADF), AFP, SAPOL, SA Ambulance Service, and the MFS. In previous years, WAVES/IPP supported Invictus Australia and the ADF in coordinating and delivering multiple Australian Team camps in preparation for several Invictus Games campaigns. The Program also partners with a number of community sporting organisations to allow participants opportunities to participate in activities outside of the University and meet their psychosocial goals and to support community reintegration and wellbeing. Some of these organisations include Cruising Yacht Club SA, Next Generation Gym, Veteran Motorsports Australia, Surf Culture, Basketball SA (Wheelchair Basketball), SANFL (Wheelchair AFL), Volleyball SA, and Adelaide Archery Club. In addition to these partnerships, WAVES/IPP has recently commenced a partnership with DVA to deliver the Heart Health Program. This will allow more Veterans to gain access to exercise programs delivered by students in a social group setting.

The preliminary qualitative evidence for the benefit of participation in the IPP, the acknowledgement of the potential for long term impact of the IPP, as well as the support of the participants and members of their family support networks to keep the IPP going is countered by the expense to do so. This includes the costs borne by the University associated with facility and equipment provision, staffing and managing the EaPP, and supervising students. The EaPP component of the IPP currently has a 12-month waiting list for new participants. The Executive and Program teams continue to work collaboratively with key stakeholders, leveraging the demonstrated benefits of the Program in attempts to secure funding to ensure its sustainability.

**5. Verification of effectiveness (quality improvement activity, data collection and its use, including graphs and tables, achievement of performance indicators, e.g. attendance figures, outcome measures, number of document downloads, page views, click through rates etc).**

Evaluation of WAVES/IPP is ongoing, undertaken by UniSA researchers who are members of the WAVES Executive Committee, but who are not involved in the day-to-day delivery of WAVES. Findings relevant to the early years of Program delivery have recently been published (details provided in the Appendix), with an overview provided here.

Between 2017 and 2020, 97 veterans had participated in or were still participating in the IPP, and 63 allied health students had completed placements as student trainers. Fifty-three individual training sessions were delivered in 2017, increasing to 2,859 in 2023. In 2023/2024, there are 60 participants actively involved at a given time (with intention to grow to 70 participants), and 35 placement students.

Table 1. Number of student-delivered EaPP sessions, per year, since inception in 2017.

| Year | EaPP Training sessions |
|---|---|
| 2017 | 53 |
| 2018 | 529 |
| 2019 | 1080 |
| 2020 | 1081 |
| 2021 | 1754 |
| 2022 | 2114 |
| 2023 | 2859 |

Interviews with participants and members of their family support network highlighted the physical, psychological, and social benefits of participation in the program. Some spoke about the positive outcome in general terms, while others discussed its physical, psychological, and social impact, including how these three aspects interacted. Veterans perceived that taking part in the IPP improved multiple aspects of their lives, and for some, there was an influence on family too.

A majority of participants described experiencing improvement in their mental health due to taking part in the IPP, while acknowledging that IPP was not a ‘cure-all’. Veterans highlighted that while they still struggled at times, they either felt more positive overall, or that training in the IPP helped them manage when they were feeling down. Comments provided by interviewed participants and members of their family support network include:

*I went from being a survivor to starting living again which was really, really good. (P2, 2018)*

*I think definitely being part of something structured, like the Pathways Program, where I actually look forward to going, not just for the fitness side or my just wellbeing, but for my mental health...(P3, 2018)*

*Just please don't stop it [the program]. Not only for my [family member], but for the other Veterans out there...Please don't stop it, because I wish there had of been something like that round when my [other family member] got out of Defence. I'm a mother, and I'm also a wife of a veteran that has suffered, so I can see the benefits hugely that it's done for our [family member], but I do wish it was around a lot earlier. (FSN7, 2019)*

*Only that we are just incredibly lucky to have this program. This program is what has kept me, even though I've had a bad six months, is what's kept me focused and motivated. I would literally still be sitting on my couch not able to do anything if it hadn't been for this program, so it's been of huge benefit. I just don't know if I can even explain how beneficial it's been, and the impact it's then had on my family and the result, my kids and my [partner]. Both because I'm a better person, but also because it's motivated my [partner], so [they are] back to running every single day. So it's had a really big impact on our whole family. (P21, 2020).*

Recently, a participant shared their appreciation of the Program and stated the positive improvements the Program has had on their relationship "*…as part of the Telehealth calls, my (partner) had a conversation with him and praised the Invictus Program and staff for the difference that it has made to me and our relationship.*"

Process evaluation assisted the Executive and Program teams to target and refine areas of the Program that were perceived to need improvement, such as the transition pathway mentioned previously, facilitating opportunities to engage in community adaptive sports, and broadening the Program beyond supporting Veterans to include First Responders and family members of participants. The connection with family, the potential to impact family-unit wellbeing, and greater involvement of participants' families in the activities of the IPP was raised as important by IPP participants, their family support network, and staff. Family members spoke about being part of 'the journey' and it being their journey also, experiencing the 'highs and lows' with the participants.

**Conclusion (1/2 x A4 page).**

The IPP, initially developed as a short-term initiative to support Veterans to prepare for the 2018 Invictus Games and incorporating one-on-one, individually tailored, student-delivered exercise programs (EaPP), has evolved to provide a more holistic approach to physical and psychological health and wellbeing. This expansion has included incorporating First Responders as participants in the EaPP component and putting strategies in place to co-design programs intended to support the wellbeing of participants' family members.

WAVES/IPP is a first of its kind program in Australia, sitting at the nexus of service delivery and education of undergraduate allied health students. The Program supports the physical and psychological wellbeing of Veterans, First Responders, and their family members and develops future allied health professionals through real-world opportunities, while also supporting their mental wellbeing.
The Program has been highlighted as an exemplar by the Australian Senate, identified as 'saving lives' by members of the Veteran community, with findings used to inform submissions to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and the South Australian Parliament's Inquiry into SAPOL. Ongoing evaluation of WAVES/IPP will continue to provide evidence of its impact while enabling refinements of Program components and co-designing offerings to ensure that the wellbeing needs of participants and their family members are met. WAVES Executive and Program Teams will continue to collaborate with stakeholders to secure funds to support the sustainability of the Program. Of particular importance currently is increasing staff capacity to support the EaPP component and removing the current waiting list to make the Program available to more participants.

**Referees (1/2 x A4 page).** Nominate two referees.

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**Appendix of Support Material (max. 8 x A4 pages).**

**References for section: Additional information about entry**

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Veterans in the 2021 Census: first result Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW); 2022 [Available from: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/veterans-in-the-2021-census-first-result.

2. Brittain I, Green S. Disability sport is going back to its roots: rehabilitation of military personnel receiving sudden traumatic disabilities in the twenty-first century. Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health. 2012;4(2):244-64.

3. Forbes D, Van Hooff M, Lawrence-Wood E, Sadler N, Hodson S, Benassi H, et al. Pathways to Care, Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study. In: Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs, editor. Canberra: Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, Australia; 2018.

4. Mobbs MC, Bonanno GA. Beyond war and PTSD: The crucial role of transition stress in the lives of military veterans. Clinical Psychology Review. 2018;59:137-44.

5. Williams L, Skomorovsky A, Wan C, Lee JEC. Qualitative Inquiry on the Health and Well-Being of Canadian Armed Forces Members and Veterans during Medical Release. Military Behavioral Health. 2022;10(1):27-36.

6. Hawkins BL, Crowe BM. Injured female Veterans' experiences with community reintegration: a qualitative study. Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health. 2018;4(2):18-27.

**UniSA WAVES Program Page:** https://www.unisa.edu.au/connect/Community-Engagement/invictus/, containing information about the Program.

**Senate inquiry report:**

Australian Government, 2023, Senate Inquiry, Adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force Veterans, Final Report, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Adaptivesportprograms/Report

**Published papers:**

Post, D, Baker, A, Milanese, S, Freegard, S, Parfitt, G 2023, Process evaluation of the Invictus Pathways Program, *PLOSONE*, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0293756.

Post, D, Baker, A, Milanese, S, Freegard, S, Parfitt, G 2023, The physical, psychological, and social impacts of participation in the Invictus Pathways Program:

A qualitative analysis of veterans' perceptions and experiences, *PLOSONE*, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287228.

**UniSA Media Release:**

Veterans mobilise health through UniSA's Invictus Pathway Program, 17th November 2023, https://www.unisa.edu.au/media-centre/Releases/2023/veterans-mobilise-health-through-unisas-invictus-pathway-program/.

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