

Diversity Award Winner: Supreme Award Winner: NZ Defence Force

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/141145019>

OverWatch programme - Military supports different sexualities

An inclusive approach to different sexualities within the Military has provided world-leading resources.

The New Zealand Defence Force is investing time and resources into ensuring employees of all sexualities and gender identities get plenty of support and understanding throughout the armed forces.

The Defence Force has about 14,000 staff members including civilians across the Navy, Army and Air Force and they are a diverse slice of society. It operates across the globe with about 400 personnel deployed in 12 operations, UN missions and exercises across 10 countries.

Squadron Leader Stu Pearce is the Chair of OverWatch who says the Defence Force understands the importance of providing guidance and support to each of its personnel so they can perform their key role at peak performance.

“Initially started by a few Air Force personnel, the value of a support group for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning (GLBTIQ) staff was quickly recognised by leaders as a key mechanism in supporting the wellbeing of its people.”

Getting OverWatch working

OverWatch was established to support the unique needs of the Defence Force’s GLBTIQ staff - both in uniform and civilian - and provide education to Defence Force leaders so they understand different sexualities. Additionally, OverWatch (OW) also supports Service Families who have children or parents who are GLBTIQ.

Squadron Leader Pearce says since last year it has grown into what is now a highly dynamic and respected entity within the Defence Force. “Examples of this include members of OW taking part in Wellington’s out in the Square, Auckland’s Big Gay Out and uniformed as well as civilian members marching in the Auckland Pride Parade. Participation in all of these events had the full support of the Chief of Defence.” He says these events challenge stereotypes and promote the Defence Force as an equitable employer. “They also sent a positive message to our personnel who may feel the need for visible role models.” Everyone working for the Defence Force learns about OverWatch through its various magazines and on the intranet’s main page. Squadron Leader Pearce says OW reports directly to the Director of Wellbeing and is able to advise the wider Wellbeing and

Command framework of issues and opportunities within the Defence Force at any given time.

Attention from the top

Squadron Leader Pearce says our Defence Force is one of only a small handful of militaries in the world to formally establish such a support group within its framework.

“OverWatch has provided an effective source of education to Commanders and policy makers. It provides advice and assists in tackling negative or non-inclusive behaviour in a swift and effective way as well as helping foster a culture of positive bystander intervention amongst Defence Force personnel.”

OW is administered by a team of volunteers who have formed a management group made up of gay, lesbian and transgender representatives from across all services and within the civilian ranks. Squadron Leader Pearce says in May this year representatives from OW met with counterparts from other countries such as Norway, Sweden and the USA in The Hague for the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia conference. At that meeting OW along with its international allies created the NATO+ Working Group.

“The aims of the group are to promote fair and equitable treatment of GLBTIQ personnel in the military and share ‘best practice’. It was very successful and positive to witness other countries doing similar programmes.”

Squadron Leader Pearce says having membership in this group means anyone in the Defence Force can access support resources from all of the other countries’ militaries who are also members. “This ensures comprehensive support on deployment or when working alongside a foreign military.”

Employee benefits

Squadron Leader Pearce says the intranet site has been popular because it is accessible domestically and overseas for all defence personnel. They can see a range of literary resources and links to external support agencies. “It includes a ‘My Story’ page where people can write personal accounts about their sexuality and coming out – particularly in the military.” He says one soldier asked about how to come out to his unit and wanted to talk to someone about his options. Another request came for support and guidance from a Service person whose teenage child had come out about being gay.

OverWatch is currently working on getting an internet presence off the ground to enhance its resources. “This is being funded by the Defence Force and is expected to be online by the end of the year.”

OW is also partnering with Massey University to hold a two day Pride in Defence conference later this year as well to help share its resources with other organisations. The conference aims to bring together senior executives and leaders from across industries as well as the public sector to focus on providing an inclusive culture within large and complex organisations.

“As with any group like ours, the ideal would be that OverWatch is no longer a requirement - that tolerance becomes acceptance and that no person requires advice and support.” Mr Pearce says until that day the Defence Force will be committed to ensuring it is an organisation that understands strength lies in the diversity of all its personnel.