

Submission
No 192

THE MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS OF THE NSW AMBULANCE SERVICE

Organisation: NSW Fire Brigades
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Date received: 31/07/2008

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31 July 2008

The Director
General Purposes Standing Committee No 2
Parliament House
Macquarie Street NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Inquiry into the Management and Operations of the NSW Ambulance Service

This submission is made in response to the media release of May 2008 from the Hon Robyn Parker MLC, Chair of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2, inviting submissions from the public.

The NSW Fire Brigades (NSWFB) had no intention of participating in any way in the Inquiry, as it was considered that there was little that the NSWFB could contribute in relation to the terms of reference. In all of its interactions with the Ambulance Service of NSW (ASNSW), the NSWFB has found the service and its people, ranging from individual paramedics to the Chief Executive to be professional, collaborative, and dedicated to the care of the sick and injured. There is little wonder that a recent Readers' Digest survey found that Ambulance Officers are the most trusted profession.

The decision to provide a short written submission has been made reluctantly after reviewing a number of written and verbal submissions to the Committee concerning the provision of rescue services by the ASNSW. Many of the submissions referred to the NSWFB in a disappointingly disparaging and untrue manner. I consider it necessary to directly refute a number of assertions made in the submissions which are considered to be variously inaccurate or untrue, and ultimately could be misleading to the Inquiry if accepted as being factual. Consequently the NSWFB would like to submit the following information for consideration by the Committee.

The question of whether or not the recommendation to transfer ASNSW rescue responsibilities to the NSWFB is acted on is a matter for Government, and the Minister for Health has directed that stakeholder consultation take place. The NSWFB

makes no recommendation to the Inquiry in this regard given the separate process that is underway.

Role of the NSWFB and ASNSW in rescue

The NSWFB is the largest provider of rescue services in NSW, operating 166 rescue units accredited by the State Rescue Board (SRB). The NSWFB carries out more rescues each year than all of the other services combined, as found by Rural Fire Service Assistant Commissioner Mark Crossweller AFSM who was engaged in 2007 to independently review the SRB's strategic direction. Other rescue service providers are the State Emergency Service (88 units), Volunteer Rescue Association (46 units), the ASNSW (14 units), and the NSW Police Force (9 units). According to the 2006/07 State Rescue Board Annual Report, agencies have the following numbers of trained and registered rescue operators:

- NSWFB 1833
- SES 898
- VRA 429
- NSWAS 181
- NSW Police 99

As can be seen, whilst acknowledging the expertise and dedication of ambulance rescue personnel, the ASNSW is a minor player in the field of direct rescue service provision. Of course at every car accident scene where people are trapped, ambulances attend in order to provide pre-hospital care and transport for the injured, fire engines attend to assure scene safety from fire, spillages, electrical and other hazards, and Police attend to control the scene and investigate. Of all the services, the NSWFB is the only one which attends EVERY accident scene with a rescue equipped vehicle and a minimum crew of 4, meaning that it can simultaneously carry out core scene safety roles while also extricating victims if required. The ASNSW and Police Force must send additional specialised vehicles and personnel to accident scenes to carry out rescue tasks.

A number of submissions to the Committee asserted that the ASNSW and the NSW Police Force are the "most efficient" of the permanent agencies in providing rescue. This is ostensibly based on statistics provided in the 2005 Auditor General's Report, Performance Audit Coordination of Rescue Services, State Rescue Board of NSW, relating to the number of call outs in 2003-04, and it is assumed that such assertions are based on the fact that ASNSW and Police rescue units carry a crew of 2, while NSWFB fire engines have a crew of 4. It is important to note that the same report concludes:

"There is no reliable and consistent information on what it costs the permanent services to provide rescue. There is insufficient information on which to offer an opinion on whether or not rescue is efficient or effective."

Subsequently the SRB advised the Auditor General that after significant research and follow up work, it too could not categorically define any reliable efficiency measures. However the NSWFB suggests that given its ability to conduct rescues as well as other roles at accident scenes using standard vehicles, equipment and crews who are already standing by and funded by the Government, there is a strong argument that fire services are in fact more efficient in such roles. As will be discussed later in this

submission, nationally and internationally, and indeed in NSW, governments have chosen to allocate the majority of rescue responsibilities to fire services. This suggests that those governments may have concluded that such arrangements are both effective and efficient.

Ability of the NSWFB to absorb ASNSW rescue roles

The recent report into the ASNSW by the Department of Premier and Cabinet made 27 recommendations, including the recommendation that the ASNSW transfer its rescue roles to the NSWFB. The NSW Government determined that consultation with stakeholders would take place in relation to this recommendation. The NSWFB has yet to be consulted, and it will be a decision for Government whether or not to implement the recommendation. The Inquiry may or may not see fit to make comment on this issue, given that it appears to be peripheral to the main Terms of Reference of the Inquiry and has been comprehensively canvassed in a number of separate independent reviews.

A number of written and verbal submissions to the Inquiry claimed that the NSWFB is not in a position to absorb rescue responsibilities of the ASNSW in the event that the service withdraws from rescue. Such claims are baseless and potentially misleading to the Inquiry if accepted as fact.

As indicated earlier in this submission, the NSWFB is the largest provider of rescue units, trained rescue operators and actual rescue services in NSW. In addition to the 166 accredited rescue units, every fire engine in NSW (339 fire stations) carries rescue equipment, as it is often required in order to force entry to burning buildings, and every firefighter (total of 6,600) is trained in rescue.

When the Board of the ASNSW proposed to withdraw from rescue in 2001 following a Performance Audit that suggested that rescue was not core business for the ASNSW, the SRB found that the NSWFB could potentially assume all ASNSW rescue responsibilities quickly, effectively, and efficiently. The NSWFB has the ability to quickly (immediately in most locations) assume rescue functions currently discharged by the ASNSW if a decision is taken to go down this path.

The NSWFB provides rescue services in many more locations than the ASNSW, has dedicated rescue training and equipment service facilities, and is the lead agency for Urban Search and Rescue (USAR). As previously stated, every fire engine carries rescue equipment with all firefighters trained in rescue. The NSWFB has unparalleled depth of rescue capability, and is regularly called upon to "cover" for other rescue services which for various reasons cannot discharge their rescue responsibilities for short or long periods. The NSWFB is the only service in NSW that is capable of doing this, and as a result the NSWFB provides a reliable "safety net" for other rescue services. During the period 8 October 2005 to 31 May 2008, the NSWFB provided rescue coverage for ASNSW rescue units on 174 separate occasions (varying from a period of hours to months) due to the unavailability of Ambulance rescue resources. This was achieved without any reduction in the quality of rescue service provided.

USAR, which was previously mentioned, is the term used to describe the specialised rescue arrangements and techniques required to rescue people trapped beneath rubble following a major building collapse. The NSWFB is the only agency in NSW with Category 2 Rescue Technicians trained to tunnel into collapsed structures, cut through

concrete and steel, and use sophisticated electronic search devices. The role of the ASNSW in USAR is patient care, not rescue, and Ambulance Rescue officers are not trained in USAR rescue techniques or any other USAR roles. This will be explained and expanded upon later in the submission.

International and national rescue arrangements

Fire services are the major providers of rescue in urban areas and many rural areas throughout the world, and within Australia. It is understood that NSW is the only place in the world where an ambulance service provides direct rescue services. In every other jurisdiction in Australia and throughout the world, trained paramedics deliver patient care rather than being "wasted" using rescue tools. It is not possible to do both at once, meaning that additional vehicles, equipment and ambulance staff are required to be dedicated to this function. SRB policies and fire service training recognises the primacy of paramedics in terms of patient care and means of patient removal, and all rescue operators are required to defer to the treating paramedics by starting and stopping extrication when directed, and complying with requests in terms of the process of patient removal. These facts belie the untrue and belittling references to the skills and capabilities of firefighters in some of the submissions.

The NSWFB is recognised as a world leader in road accident rescue and USAR. NSWFB teams regularly compete in Australasian and world rescue championships. The NSWFB has won both the world title and Australasian title as the world's and Australasia's most skilled and competent rescuers on many occasions over the last decade, and on the other occasions has usually placed in the top three. The NSWFB is recognised by the United Nations International Search & Rescue Advisory Group as having a USAR Task Force capable of international deployment following earthquakes and other major disasters. NSWFB personnel have deployed in the past to Taiwan, Turkey, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and The Maldives following disasters.

Urban Search and Rescue and Chemical, Biological and Radiological response

A number of written and verbal submissions to the Inquiry suggested that a transfer of rescue responsibilities to the NSWFB would result in a degradation of the state's Chemical Biological and Radiological (CBR) as well as USAR capabilities. Indeed, one verbal submission seemed to suggest that the NSWFB had no role in these areas, and that the ASNSW was the lead agency in both cases, providing the state's core capabilities. This is untrue.

The NSWFB is the designated combat agency for CBR emergencies and the designated lead agency for USAR emergencies. In acknowledging the multi-agency requirements associated with successfully managing these emergencies the NSWFB trains ASNSW Special Casualty Access Team (SCAT) members to work with NSWFB Hazmat Technicians in CBR, and NSWFB Rescue Technicians in USAR. The SCAT Officers' roles are related to patient care, not direct rescue. NSWFB personnel make up the majority of a USAR Task Force. The ASNSW role is vital but relatively minor in terms of numbers, and is not concerned with actual rescue operations, which are conducted by firefighters.

ASNSW rescue operators are not trained and accredited by the NSWFB in CBR, breathing apparatus or USAR as has been suggested. ASNSW SCAT Officers are trained in these areas and the NSWFB is unaware of any suggestion that the number

of SCAT Officers will be reduced, given that they are unrelated to the ASNSW rescue role.

Overall benefit and cost savings in the event of a transfer

A number of submissions claimed that there would be no significant overall benefit or cost savings in the event that the NSWFB assumed rescue responsibility from the ASNSW. A number of recent independent reviews strongly suggested otherwise.

The 2005 Audit Office Report into the State Rescue Board stated *"According to the Ambulance Service of NSW in 2001, continuing to provide rescue services presented an opportunity cost which was affecting its core business."*

The 2008 Performance Review – Ambulance Service of NSW conducted by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet stated: *"If current ambulance rescue officers were used exclusively for core ambulance work, there would potentially be significant efficiencies generated compared to their current utilisation (up to 80 FTEs)."*

It is understood that these reviews envisaged that a large number of Ambulance Officer positions could be redirected to direct patient care if the ASNSW transferred its rescue responsibilities to the NSWFB. The NSWFB is unaware of any suggestion that this would not be the case if such a transfer were to occur.

Claims that the NSWFB would be required to spend millions of dollars in replicating the rescue services provided by the ASNSW are not true. The NSWFB could quickly and easily assume the additional rescue responsibilities within existing resources at little additional cost. As previously stated, all front line NSWFB fire engines carry state of the art hydraulic rescue equipment for the purposes of structural entry. This is the same equipment used by other rescue agencies for road accident and general land rescue. Additionally all front line NSWFB appliances have rope rescue capabilities for heights and depths, and breathing apparatus for confined space rescues and hazardous atmospheres. NSWFB crews are trained to use this equipment in both fire and non fire emergency situations, and rescue from fires and other emergencies is core business for firefighters.

Given the superficial and sometimes questionable information contained in some written and verbal submissions to the Inquiry as opposed to previous comprehensive and independent examinations of the issue, the Inquiry might consider that either more information is required, or no findings should be made on the rescue issue.

Affects on fire response coverage

It was asserted in some submissions that assumption of ASNSW rescue responsibilities by the NSWFB would lead to reduced fire or rescue response coverage for the community. This ignores the significant latent capability of the NSWFB to absorb more rescue responsibilities, the fact that the NSWFB currently carries out most rescues in NSW, the fact that the ASNSW is a very small player in the rescue field, and also the huge difference in agency workloads. While the NSWFB is the busiest fire service in Australia, responding to more than 140,000 emergency calls each year, the ASNSW responds to more than 1,000,000 calls for assistance.

The NSWFB, even during major bushfire emergencies and flood disasters has always been able to maintain fire coverage and rescue response. Claims in some of the submissions stating otherwise are baseless.

Role of paramedics in rescue

Some media statements attributed to union officials have denigrated rescue capabilities of firefighters and stated that only paramedics have the skills necessary to conduct rescue operations. The same statements claimed that rescue is a "medical process". Taking such statements on face value and accepting them as common sense could logically lead to the assumption that ambulance services must therefore provide the bulk of rescue services worldwide. In fact NSW is the only place in the world where an ambulance service diverts trained paramedics from patient care to use of rescue tools at accident scenes. In NSW the ASNSW has a small number of rescue units and plays only a relatively minor role in direct rescue services when compared to the NSWFB, SES and VRA.

As previously stated, SRB and NSWFB policies recognise the primacy of the patient's wellbeing, and the treating paramedics. Paramedics have the authority to start and stop a rescue operation, and determine the process and timing of extrication. Firefighters always defer to paramedics in this respect.

Until 2005 Tasmania was the only other place in the world where the ambulance service had a rescue role. In 2005 the Tasmanian Government commissioned a review into the provision of road accident rescue capabilities in Tasmania. A report was subsequently published titled "Road Accident Rescue Review Report 2005". As a consequence of the review the Tasmanian Fire Service assumed responsibility in urban areas for the physical aspects of extrication utilising existing resources. The Tasmanian Ambulance Service continued to maintain full responsibility for patient care at the scene of road accident rescues.

The review included, as an appendix, a submission titled "Expert Advice received Australasian Road Rescue Organisation (ARRO)" that examined the question of whether physical extrication is a medical process and must be conducted by paramedics. ARRO is the peak body representing key providers of rescue throughout the Australasian Region.

A summary of the ARRO submission provided to the review included the following:

- approximately 90% of extrications performed in developed countries are performed by fire services.
- ambulance personnel are an integral part of the rescue team in providing care to trapped patient/s.
- it is not necessary for the personnel performing RAR to be medically trained to the level of paramedic.
- with appropriate initial and ongoing training, fire, SES, police or ambulance personnel could perform the rescue task with the same efficiency and effectiveness.

- using highly skilled paramedics for anything other than primary patient care may leave individuals and organisations exposed unless there is sufficient surge capacity. (emphasis added)
- it would be very hard in small services to maintain adequate training for paramedics in both patient care protocols and rescue roles.
- rescue is a multidisciplinary integrated activity best coordinated by personnel skilled in rescue planning and with members of various disciplines tasked to deal with their areas of speciality such as patient care, reducing hazards, traffic control and technical rescue.
- paramedic staff need a working knowledge of the roles of rescue personnel, but not necessarily to the degree of being able to perform the tasks. In turn, rescue personnel need to have an appreciation of the patient care considerations, and
- ARRO raised the difficulty of ambulance services having the capacity to provide concurrent services in RAR and medical care in comparison to other agencies. Fire agencies for example have experienced decreasing demand for their primary services in fire response and HAZMAT incidents, however ambulance services have experienced increasing demand due to the ageing population, access to services and community expectations.

The basic premise of the ARRO submission is that while fire services can conduct rescues as a part of their core business and at negligible additional cost given that they do not require additional staff, training, equipment or specialised vehicles, paramedics are “wasted” unless they are being utilised in their core role of patient care, and the ambulance services must pay for vehicles, equipment and training which are not considered to be core business for ambulance services anywhere else in the world.

Other reviews and inquiries

As the Inquiry would be aware, a number of reviews and inquiries have been conducted over recent years in relation to general land rescue in NSW including:

- 2001 Auditor General’s Performance Report (No. 80) into the Ambulance Service
- 2004 Public Accounts Committee Report (No. 3/53-146)
- 2003 Pickering Coronial Inquiry (No. 1190 of 2002)
- 2007 Auditor General’s Performance Audit, Readiness to Respond, Ambulance Service of NSW, Follow-up of 2001 Performance Audit
- 2008 Department of Premier and Cabinet Performance Review: Ambulance Service of NSW.

Summary

The NSWFB respectfully submits that should the Inquiry choose to make any recommendations on the question of rescue, bearing in mind that the Government has directed that stakeholders be consulted on the matter and that rescue was not a specific matter noted in the Inquiry terms of reference, that some statements and assertions made on this matter be seriously questioned and checked for accuracy before being accepted.

As indicated, the purpose of this submission was to highlight possible errors of fact.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Mullins', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Greg Mullins AFSM
Commissioner**