

**REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INQUIRY INTO THE
MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS OF THE AMBULANCE
SERVICE OF NSW**

Organisation: NSW Fire Brigade
Name: Mr Greg Mullins
Position: Commissioner
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NEW SOUTH WALES FIRE BRIGADES

227 Elizabeth Street Sydney NSW 2000
PO Box A249, Sydney South NSW 1232
Telephone: (02) 9265 2999 Facsimile: (02) 9265 2988



Home Page: www.fire.nsw.gov.au Email: info@fire.nsw.gov.au ABN: 12 593 473 110

Your Reference:

File No.: NFB/00808

Contact Officer:

Telephone No.: (02) 9265 2920

Facsimile No.: (02) 9265 2988

Email: commissioner@fire.nsw.gov.au

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

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Review of the implementation of the recommendations of the Inquiry into the management and operations of the Ambulance Service of NSW

This brief submission is made in response to the letter dated 24 November 2009 from the Hon Robyn Parker MLC, Chair of General Purpose Standing Committee No 2, inviting comments relating to the review of the implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations.

In its original submission the NSW Fire Brigades (NSWFB) restricted comment to matters concerning the provision of rescue services by the Ambulance Service of NSW (ASNSW) and changes implemented following withdrawal of eight (8) accredited rescue units by the ASNSW. The submission was made with some reluctance, but in the interests of accuracy. It followed review of a number of written and verbal submissions made to the Committee that referred to the NSWFB, its capabilities and firefighters in a disparaging and untrue manner. It was considered that leaving such statements unchallenged could have caused needless concern and led the Committee to draw highly inaccurate or incorrect conclusions about changes to the delivery of rescue services. The submission therefore concerned itself solely with the withdrawal of the ASNSW as a provider of rescue in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and the Central Coast, and the associated recommendation from the Inquiry, Recommendation 33.

This further submission seeks to provide a brief update to the Committee on the success of changes to rescue services that were made on September 4, 2008. Since those changes, the nine (9) NSWFB rescue units that replaced the eight (8) withdrawn ASNSW rescue units have responded to a total of 636 rescue calls. All of these have been dealt with efficiently, proficiently, and professionally.

Over the same time period, the NSWFB responded to a total of 5857 rescue calls throughout NSW, reflecting that the NSWFB is the largest provider of accredited rescue units, rescue operators, and deals with more rescue extrications than all other rescue services combined. This depth of capability and experience explains why the State Rescue Board (SRB) had no hesitation in asking the NSWFB to take on rescue responsibilities at the locations where rescue units were withdrawn by the ASNSW in September 2008. The changes were achieved quickly, effectively and efficiently using existing personnel, vehicles and equipment. Relatively minor one-off costs were incurred to procure some additional items of equipment, to conduct additional training courses, and to pay staff allowances associated with temporary transfers of experienced rescue operators to the new locations.

The NSWFB believes that since the transfer of ASNSW rescue responsibilities to the NSWFB in major metropolitan areas, despite assertions made at the time by a number of individuals and the Health Services Union, there has been a very significant and measurable improvement in rescue service delivery. One of the major improvements is in the area of dispatch and coordination of rescue services. Prior to the changes, an inefficient, manual process was employed by Police Rescue Coordinators in Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong using telephone hook-ups. This inefficient process resulted in delayed dispatch of rescue units on some occasions, and sometimes the dispatch of incorrect units. After the changes, because the NSWFB became the predominant provider of rescue units in the major metropolitan areas, a more streamlined approach was able to be adopted whereby the Police Force simply passes on rescue calls to the NSWFB which then uses the computer-aided dispatch system to locate and instantly alert the closest rescue unit to each call. The NSWFB and Police also have an instant electronic messaging system that links their respective emergency call-taking and dispatch centres, further streamlining the process.

Following transfer of rescue responsibilities to the NSWFB, the Health Services Union tabled 41 complaints against the NSWFB alleging a reduction in rescue service in the affected areas. The SRB immediately referred the allegations to the NSW Police Force for independent investigation. The NSW Police Force subsequently reported to the SRB that each allegation had been investigated and all were found to be unsubstantiated. The SRB also noted that the complaints were anonymous, and that the formal complaint-handling process had been bypassed in each case. No formal complaints were made via any of the emergency services, and the Police investigation was unable to corroborate any of the allegations made by the anonymous complainants.

Recommendation 33 of the Inquiry stated as follows: *That all rescue incidents require paramedics to be involved in the coordinated response.*

The NSWFB unambiguously supported and continues to support this recommendation. ASNSW Paramedics are involved as part of the coordinated response to all rescue incidents. Whilst the ASNSW is best placed to comment and provide detail on this, the changes in 2008 appear to have resulted in improved clinical responses by the ASNSW, as 89 paramedics formerly tasked with using rescue tools at accident scenes have now been released to provide direct patient care. It is understood that the changes enabled a significant increase in the number of ASNSW rapid response units and introduction of Special Operations Team paramedics who use their combined clinical and rescue skills to access and treat

patients, working with Police, the NSWFB and other emergency services. Coupled with an increase in the number of accredited rescue units and rescue operators, and improved coordination and dispatch, the benefits to the community are both tangible and undeniable.

As indicated in the NSW Government's response to the Inquiry Report, SRB policy requires the response of paramedics to all rescue incidents where people are trapped or injured. The NSWFB has for many years enshrined in its policies, procedures and training that the clinical needs of patients at all times take precedence over rescue operations. NSWFB rescue policies clearly recognise primacy of the role of the ASNSW in pre-hospital care and transport of the sick and injured, and the responsibility of firefighters to support, assist and defer to ASNSW Paramedics in the management of patient health and welfare during rescue operations.

To further enhance integrated response to rescues and other emergencies, the NSWFB proposed that ASNSW paramedics be embedded with the NSWFB when undertaking special operations, such as bushfire strike teams deployed in NSW and interstate, at hazardous materials emergencies, and at rescue scenes. This approach has been fully supported by ASNSW management and the services are finalising protocols for joint special operations. In this way the valuable skills of former ASNSW rescue officers continue to be leveraged in the interests of the community, while boosting front-line ASNSW clinical resources.

The NSWFB is of the view that the arrangements implemented in 2008 represent a more integrated approach to emergency management and reflect the best use of available resources in the interest of the community.

Should any further information be required, please do not hesitate to contact the Commissioner's Staff Officer, Chief Superintendent John Denny on 9265 2678.

Yours sincerely,



Greg Mullins AFSM
Commissioner