

**Submission  
No 115**

**THE MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS OF THE NSW  
AMBULANCE SERVICE**

**Name:** Mr Peter Sparks

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## **Submission to Legislative Council Inquiry into Management and Operations of the NSW Ambulance Service**

My name is Peter Sparks I have been an Ambulance Officer with NSW Ambulance Service since 14 November 1977. Apart from a very short period of working in Sydney on road for my level 3, now level 4 training, all my experience has been working in the Riverina region mainly at Griffith and Narrandera branches.

I still enjoy being an Ambulance Officer and find it a very rewarding job. I am writing this submission because I am concerned about the current ASNSW Permanent Posting Policy which applies to recruits after they have completed their twelve months training. Since 1985 I have watched a procession of new officers employed under this agreement sent to Griffith and surrounding stations only to see them leave the service, or transfer to other stations closer to major cities a short time later. There has to be a better way to staff remote rural towns.

The aim of my submission

**I intend to prove to you that the current Permanent Posting Policy is detrimental to efficient recruitment and retention of new officers into Ambulance Service of NSW.**

As I said I joined the Service in August 1977. In those days all recruitment was done locally by District Superintendents. I knew from the time of the interview that I would be trained in Sydney, as is the case now, I would do six months on road training at Griffith Station, and after successfully completing further training in Sydney I was to be posted to Narrandera. My job application was successful and all that I was told at the interview occurred in the allotted time.

During the early eighties Ambulance Districts were amalgamated and became Ambulance Divisions and recruitment was centralized in Sydney. Recruits were now asked to sign a contract with the ASNSW stating they were willing to work anywhere in NSW. New recruits can be asked to sign this contract three times, once on their initial application, once during their initial training at Rozelle and again during their Rozelle training prior to their permanent posting.

Let us compare my relatively stress free recruitment to what happens now when a new recruit who normally lives in Sydney and signs the contract. They complete their eight week Induction course and commence their Probationary on road period (maximum of ten months) at a large centre. They then complete their In-Service 1 course and are then usually permanently posted to a small remote community like Hillston where they are expected to stay for 2 years. What we are asking the recruits to do is totally disrupt their lives for three years to become an Ambulance Officer. The first year of training pushes their boundaries at the larger centre and gets them excited about the job, then they are posted to a back of beyond community like Hillston. Initially they try their best to accept the culture shock and assimilate into the community, but it doesn't take long before long hours tied to the Ambulance Service between on duty and on call commitments and driving back and forth to Sydney visiting family and friends takes its toll. The officer soon begins applying for jobs closer to home. Some become so frustrated they resign or join other state ambulance services whilst others will try to get out on compassionate grounds and the rest just get out as fast as they can. One officer described the feeling of working in a

small station like Hillston she said "I thought I was being punished by the service and I didn't know why". Very few ever last the two years, unless they have a good reason to be there.

In fact Hillston Station in the last fourteen months has had nine officers who had no reason to be there, two of which resigned, and the other seven managed to get transfers to other stations. This churn of officers through Hillston means Griffith has had to provide extra relief to support Hillston. This in turn disrupts the lives, of the Griffith officers providing that relief and costs the service money.

So what are the reasons an officer would stay for any length of time in Hillston, from my research there only three reasons. The first is family members living in the town or area, the second is relationships they have formed while living there and the distant third is officers who thought becoming a Branch Manager would advance their career. This has helped some but the others have left usually around the two year period and two resigned in the last seven years.

Since 1985 our records show that at least fifty three Ambulance officers have left Griffith. These figures would not be too bad if during that period all the officers were coming and going but Griffith, although perhaps geographically remote, is a small thriving city with great amenities. Griffith Branch has always had a core group of long term officers staying for up to 10 years or more, this means the 53 officers were only filling somewhere between 4 and more recently 7 positions.

To support my theory that family friends and loved ones were the single biggest reason people leave remote rural towns I surveyed six officers who knew some or all of the officers to understand why each officer left. I used three broad headings to cover all the possible reasons.

- 1) **Family and Relationships**, this covered all officers who moved closer to home or closer to their partner.
- 2) **A Career move**, this covered all officers who went for a promotion, wanted to work at busier stations or wanted to become an Intensive Care Paramedic.
- 3) **Other reasons**, this area covers those who resigned or retired, left due to grievances' with other officers, officers who like to move to a new area every few years, officers who had completed their probationary period at Griffith and were permanently posted somewhere else, officers who moved away from families attracted to coastal living or others we simply did not know why they left.

I calculated the results of each surveyed officers into a percentage and taking the highest and lowest of these gave me the range for each heading. The findings as to the reasons officers left are:-

- 1) **Family and Relationships 38%-66%**
- 2) **Career Move 11%-49%**
- 3) **Other Reasons 12%-21%**

It is easy to see the biggest range is Family and Relationships. It is also interesting to examine why people stayed in Griffith. All officers who have stayed 9 years or more have family in nearby towns or are involved in a relationship with someone from Griffith. I feel the combination of reasons why officers leave or stay in a rural community indicate that family and relationships is by far the greatest influence and I am sure this finding would be echoed right across rural NSW.

If we now go to the even more remote community of Hillston and research their branch staff movements, they show from the year 2000 to now 17 officers left. Branch managers stayed the longest averaging nearly 25 months and ambulance officer averaged only 7 months. During this time huge amounts of relief had to be provided by Griffith and other branches to keep Hillston Branch operational.

My point so far is to highlight the failure of the Permanent Posting Policy to provide remote rural communities with a stable workforce; in fact it works totally against the natural movement of officers in the service, it causes stress, low morale and a negative experience to the new officers joining our ranks not to mention the increased cost to the service.

What can we do! Until now there has been little or no alternative to the Permanent Posting Policy, however, the latest management restructure changes this. District Officers now look after the resource needs of a small group of stations similar to what Area Superintendents did when I joined the service. They are perfectly positioned to micro manage the recruitment needs of each branch. They could actively recruit for these branches provided they could give the same guarantees to potential officers similar to what I received in 1977 i.e. after the first 12 months of training the officer would be permanently posted to a branch in the District Officers Area. This immediately decreases the stress involved with new recruits worrying about where they will be sent. It increases the likelihood that they will be working near family friends and loved ones, not necessarily in the same town and increases the possibility they will stay in the area.

I am of the understanding in the past local recruitment drives have been an expensive exercise not necessarily producing sufficient numbers of recruits capable of meeting our high standards. I feel seven years of drought has changed all that. I would like to put the case that the drought may have presented us with a possible resource that would not have been interested in joining our ranks in the past. A large number of young farmers are working away from their parents farms at present to bring in extra income and the majority of these would meet our recruitment standards very well. They have studied at University level in both Business and Agricultural Science Courses, they are motivated people used to lots of stress, they are used to driving trucks and handling large machinery, they perform invasive veterinary skills similar to those practiced by our officers and they are used to living in places like Hillston, surely they present us with an opportunity to stabilize our work force in these problem towns.

The most widely used media in rural areas is radio and this is the best way to try and recruit these men and women. We have to get on the air waves and talk up the service and we have much to talk about and be proud of. It's been an honor for me to have been a part of an ambulance service which over 30 years has transformed itself from a very basic first aid service to a modern ambulance service with the best equipment, the best vehicles, an education system

which is doing great thing in training and education. District Officer Peter Cutjar is my D.O. and was involved in the 1988 local recruitment drive throughout NSW. His experience would make this district a perfect place to trial a local recruitment drive. Based on what I have said above and I would like to offer my experience in broadcasting and public speaking to assist him.

To conclude, my submission proves that the Permanent Posting Policy used by the ASNSW is detrimental to the efficient recruitment and retention of new officers into the Ambulance Service of NSW. I have shown what motivates officers to leave or stay at a remote rural community and emphasizes that our human resource management should be based on making natural staff movements work for us not against us. I have highlighted where these new officers could be procured and what media we should use to attract them. I have also offered my services to assist DO Cutjar in a local recruitment trial.

I trust my submission will receive due consideration.

Peter M Sparks

A/O Griffith Branch