

Submission
No 18

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

Name: Suppressed
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Partially Confidential

Sir / Maam,

I am submitting this email to the inquiry board for purposes of officer retention and conditions officers work under in rural areas. I have been with the service for approx . Prior to my service with the NSW Ambulance I served with the Australian Army.

My initial rural posting saw me go straight to the relief roster for which I was required to relieve at stations surrounding home usually within 100 to 150km's. It was very daunting to say the least as of my 2nd day I was required to relieve at a small town an hour plus from home, for 5days. I was a relief officer for approx 2yrs before moving up to the line thus not required to carry out overnight relief anymore. During my relief rotation I spent allot of time at small towns, thus gaining a good insight to the problems and revolving doors these towns are famous for within the Ambulance service.

There are many areas within the Ambulance service that are lacking for a better word in regards to retaining our officers. Under the current scheme our officers are generally posted to metro areas to complete their 1st yrs service in training then for the next posting (level 2) it's off to the country, usually at a 3 officer station with a town's population of 1000 or less. Now I am sure that all sounds exciting especially after recruiting have thrown a bit of sugar onto it. BUT. In truth when the officer arrives out there (with family or pets cowering behind) they find themselves isolated, unsure of what is expected and thrown into the very deep end. For example a town of approx 500. A town with very few services for which all shut their doors no later than 5pm. Nearest major towns with hospitals, or shopping centres open after 5pm are usually up to 100kms away.

Below are a few problems and some suggestions:

Accommodation: If the officer is able to find a house in town it is of substandard condition. Most towns do have an Ambulance house allocated for the Station officer only, however there are towns that may have 2 houses, still leaving one or two officers with little or no accommodation. I believe the officers pay local market value for these houses. This still leaves two officers seeking own accommodation. In comparison the military have a wonderful system for all its members, with DHA (Defence Housing Authority) and provide housing at a much cheaper rate or subsidise rent if the member has to rent locally. This would provide one less hassle and burden for the new officer in these strange isolated towns. Also an excellent incentive to stay and save some money. Therefore slowing that revolving door.

Moving as we all know is stressful at the best of times for us and our pets, if the military recognises pets as family members why doesn't the Ambulance service? The service doesn't provide any assistance for the moving of the family pets.

During my move I forgot to obtain a receipt for a meal for my family and I. So I asked the service for a standard reimbursement of \$5 per member of my family just to cover the cost to which I was told NO, you must have a receipt, the meal cost around \$40, the reimbursement would have been less than half the cost of the meal, but that didn't matter. The military deposit all monies for moving, disturbance allowance etc into your account prior to moving with no problems or receipts required. It is all worked out pro rata. You only require a receipt when extra out of pocket expenses are incurred. Why can't the service adopt this system?

Working Conditions / Station: These stations don't carry a high workload usually 20-30 jobs a month. This does create a challenge mentally for the officer who has just had an exciting year in Sydney/Wollongong/Newcastle etc doing approx 10 or more jobs a day. Also with the metro areas the resources are totally different i.e. Level 5 (intensive care paramedics) for back up where as rural officers are lucky to have two of you let alone a second car. The use of the rescue helicopter for major incidents is not available again limiting our resources.

Usually the officer has some study to do as for the next 2yrs they are required to prepare for P1, but as we know there is only so much study / reading one can do. The roster system in these towns is 7 days on plus on call, then 2 off, then 7 on again plus on call, then 5 off, then return to 7 on again with on call. The on call provides a challenge in its self thus reducing the officer's chance of engaging in most local sports, (not impossible in most cases but definitely challenging as these towns don't always play locally and have to travel).

There are, I am sure plenty of ways the service could provide more incentives to these officers in order for them to stay, like for example, offering full internet access (they trust us with people's lives but not the net), pay TV., some exercise equipment on station, gym memberships (if the town has one), free entry to the local pool. More interaction with the services educators. Paying for the officer to do some outside courses. Monetary incentives if the officer completes a certain number of years such as \$5000 a year for 3 years in the one town. Career incentives such as the use of extra skills, pharmacologies etc whilst posted to these towns. A pick of postings once a certain amount of years are completed.

I am sure with some of these incentives in place it would also allow for skilled officers from the metro areas to come out and work at these stations, which would provide the new officers with a good skills mix to work with. Under the current scheme there is no incentive or any attraction for these skilled officers to go and experience working in the country. Allot of the new officers fear that with the little workload in these towns that their skills base will deteriorate therefore speeding up their decision to move as quickly as possible.

As I have worked with these new officers in these towns I hear their concerns and requests, there is little support from the service for these officers, for many it's the put up and shut up attitude. The throw away line of "you signed on the dotted line to go anywhere in the state" is a load of rubbish. If the officer was informed of exactly (not withholding any truth) what was expected of them before they signed the dotted line there would definitely be less signing. Recruiting need to realise too that people will say they will do anything just to get into the job, then they will work out the problem of posting once employed and told by peers etc of how best to tackle the problem. Why is it that the Police have incentives? Why is it the Fire Brigade have a waiting list for its members to go country? But yet the Ambulance service has the big revolving door in rural remote NSW?

In summary I know there are problems within all services with retention, however some of the above mentioned problems could be fixed with little money, others require bigger cheques understandably, but the cost to the Ambulance service and local communities of constantly moving officers and training new ones has to outweigh them. Although I am in a town of >20,000 and a station of 12 or more officers, we still have problems retaining some staff (mostly due to relief rosters I believe). I know we all wish for that magic wand filled with money to fix all, but we could start by listening to the diggers on the ground and not the bean counters or managers higher up. It shouldn't be about how much money we can save all the time, rather than how can we better our service for the local community and improve conditions for staff.

Regards