

**Submission  
No 121**

## **INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES**

**Organisation:** Mental Health Commission of NSW

**Date received:** 2 August 2017

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**Mental Health Commission**  
of New South Wales



# **Inquiry into emergency services agencies**

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**Submission to Portfolio Committee No 4 – Legal  
Affairs by the Mental Health Commission of NSW**

August 2017

Submission to the Legislative Council, Portfolio Committee No 4 – Legal Affairs: Inquiry into emergency services agencies

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2442>

## 1. The Mental Health Commission of NSW

The Mental Health Commission of NSW is an independent statutory agency responsible for monitoring, reviewing and improving mental health services and the mental health and wellbeing of the people in NSW. It works with government agencies and the community to secure better mental health and wellbeing for everyone, to prevent mental illness, and to ensure the availability of appropriate supports in or close to home when people are unwell or at risk of becoming unwell.

The Commission promotes policies and practices that recognise the autonomy of people who experience mental illness and support their recovery, emphasising their personal and social needs and preferences as well as broader health concerns.

The Commission is guided in all of its work by the lived experience of people with a mental illness.

The Commission works in three main ways:

- Advocating, educating and advising about positive change to mental health policy, practice and systems in order to support better responses to people who experience mental illness, and their families and carers.
- Partnering with community-managed organisations, academic institutions, professional groups or government agencies to support the development of better approaches to the provision of mental health services and improved community wellbeing, and promote their wide adoption.
- Monitoring and reviewing the current system of mental health supports and progress towards achieving the Actions in *Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health 2014 - 2024*, and providing this information to the community and the mental health sector in ways that encourage positive change.

Should you wish to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission in more detail please contact Ms Elizabeth Hewitt, Senior Advisor, on \_\_\_\_\_ or at \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Our work with emergency service agencies

This submission is an overview of the Commission's work to date with the NSW first responder agencies, as well as our observations regarding workplace mental health generally. It is not intended to be a broader commentary on the support services available to emergency services workers and volunteers to assist with mental health issues resulting from workplace trauma and the effectiveness of those programs.

Following the release of beyondblue's *Good practice framework for mental health and wellbeing in first responder organisations* in 2016, the Premier and Minister for Mental Health asked the Commission to work with NSW first responder agencies to look at what was

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already in place to support first responder mental health and wellbeing in NSW and what more could be done in this space.

The Commission brought together senior representatives from NSW Police Force, Fire and Rescue NSW, the Ambulance Service of NSW, the State Emergency Service of NSW, the Rural Fire Service of NSW as well as the NSW Chief Psychiatrist, Dr Murray Wright, A/ Professor Sam Harvey, Black Dog Institute, and representatives from icare (Insurance and Care NSW).

This group met regularly through the latter half of 2016 and reached a consensus on a shared commitment to promote and protect the mental health and wellbeing of first responders. This commitment is articulated in the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for First Responder Organisations in NSW*. The Strategy, developed by Black Dog Institute and the Commission, in collaboration with the first responder organisations, was formally launched by the Premier and the Minister for Mental Health at Parliament House in October 2016. The Strategy is available via <https://nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/mental-health-and-wellbeing-strategy-for-first-responder-organisations-in-nsw>.

### **3. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for First Responder Organisations in NSW**

The mental health impacts of first responder work, historically, were not well recognised or understood. This is changing for the better. A combination of research - for example the work of Black Dog Institute, which has clearly shown the cumulative impact of trauma on mental health – and decreasing stigma and discrimination across the whole of society and within first responder organisations has brought this important issue to the foreground.

To achieve effective mental health supports in the workplace requires resources and programs. More than this it requires culture change driven first and foremost by leadership from the top.

It is important to acknowledge the different contexts for each agency. However, there is also a great deal shared in common and these areas of commonality represent real opportunities for knowledge exchange, collaboration and pooled resources. The Strategy presents one way of working together on these shared areas.

The *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for First Responder Organisations in NSW* adopts an integrated approach to mental health, with different interventions aimed at mental health promotion, protection and intervention. The approach is set out in six strategic objectives:

1. Promote and support the good mental health and wellbeing of first responders throughout their career
2. Develop strategies to reduce the risk of mental disorder and promote mental resilience amongst first responders
3. Create a culture that facilitates early identification of mental health problems in first responders and encourages early help seeking
4. First responders who develop a mental disorder receive high quality, evidence-based mental health care that facilitates the best possible functional recovery

5. The unique factors associated with first responder work are acknowledged and appropriate systems put in place to identify and mitigate the mental health consequences of repeated trauma exposure
6. Continue to build an evidence base to better understand the mental health of first responders and to facilitate the development of new evidence-based interventions to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

The Strategy is deliberately high level and does not deal with operational matters. This reflects the fact that while many factors are shared amongst the different first responder organisations, there are also important differences between the organisations. The Strategy sets the overarching direction, but it is up to each individual agency to adapt it for their own context. The strategic objectives set out in the Strategy will only be met via a coordinated effort by all stakeholders, including first responder organisations, policy makers, health professionals, insurance and rehabilitation organisations, unions and first responders themselves.

The Strategy was not developed in a vacuum, rather it built on what was already happening in the separate first responder agencies and sought to bring this together into a single strategic commitment.

The Strategy was launched in October 2016 and was accompanied by a series of videos, developed by the Commission, with funding from icare. The videos show frontline staff and volunteers talking about their own experiences of mental health problems. Importantly, they also talk about the support they have accessed and the steps they now take to protect their own wellbeing. The videos are used for training by the first responder organisations and can be accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAwa-UnYahc&t=125s>.

Since the release of the Strategy the high level group will continue to meet to maintain a strategic focus on improving the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and an officer level group is convened on a bi-monthly basis by Suncorp on behalf of icare.

#### **4. Workplace mental health**

First responder agencies are not alone in recognising the need to do more to support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees and volunteers. Workplaces across all industries are realising the significant interplay between work and mental health and increasingly workplaces are recognising their responsibilities to support their staff and provide inclusive, supportive workplaces. Examples in other industries include the Mates in Construction/ Mates in Mining initiatives, or the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation for lawyers.

Workplace mental health is a rapidly growing area of interest and there are some established leaders in the field. WayAhead, which is funded through the Commission, have been working with employers to find solutions to workplace mental health for over ten years. WayAhead Workplaces brings together a diverse range of employer representatives from human resource officers through to researchers to develop better approaches to employee wellbeing. Nationally, *Heads Up*, a partnership between the Mental Healthy Workplace Alliance and beyondblue, provides a range of resources, information and advice for individuals and organisations to create mentally healthy workplaces.

First responders do face unique challenges given the traumatic nature of their work however the basic principles in creating a mentally healthy workplace are the same for all workplaces and we should be seeking out opportunities to learn and share knowledge between industries. Given the work that has been undertaken in first responder organisations to achieve wholesale cultural change, these agencies can be promoted as good practice examples to other workplaces taking on the challenge of providing a supportive workplace.

