

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Tenth Report — “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers” — Tabling

MR A.P. O’GORMAN (Joondalup) [10.12 am]: I present for tabling the tenth report and associated submissions of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee titled “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers”.

[See papers 5409 and 5410.]

Mr A.P. O’GORMAN: First of all, I congratulate and thank the many, many people who came to our committee and gave us evidence on this issue. I acknowledge three of those people who are in the Speaker’s gallery today—David Nelson, David Matthews and David Bentley. All three gentlemen fronted up to our committee and gave us vital evidence about how the staff of our agencies are treated, particularly within WA Police.

This report finds that although the Western Australian economy leads Australia, the processes used by state government agencies to prepare and protect our police officers, our firefighters, our paramedics and the nearly 50 000 volunteers fall well behind those in other jurisdictions. This report seeks to correct that situation by recommending that the CEOs of relevant agencies be made accountable for the psychological wellbeing of the staff and volunteers within their agencies. As we took evidence, we found that although many of our staff and volunteers are very well prepared for the job they do, little support is given by our agencies to those staff and volunteers once they have experienced a traumatic experience.

Initially, when we started this inquiry, we thought that where the trauma and stress came from was related mainly to major disasters. With that in mind, we went to Christchurch to talk to people following the earthquakes, to New York following the 9/11 attacks and spoke to many people there, and also to New Orleans and spoke to many people and attended a conference on disaster management. That brought home to us that, yes, with these big disasters, there is a high level of stress and trauma for the first responders. We were amazed at the resilience of the first responders and the communities of Christchurch, New York and New Orleans. In Christchurch, we went through the red zone. Twelve months after the earthquake hit, they were still taking buildings down and the area was closed to the general population. In New York, we visited the site of 9/11 and the memory pools. That was a very moving experience; there were many, many thousands of people at those memory pools still grieving and still feeling the sadness. People go there from all over the world; in fact, people from my electorate of Joondalup visited those remembrance pools this year for the tenth anniversary of the attacks. The reports I heard were that it is still traumatic for people who go there, even though they were not involved. We all know that the New Orleans people felt let down by their agencies and that they were not responded to in an appropriate manner. However, we found that that community still has resilience and still bounces back; people rebuild their houses and businesses and go on and do their normal day-to-day work.

Over the past 10 years in Western Australia, we have had many natural disasters, but luckily very few with great loss of life. But in talking to all the people who presented to our committee, we discovered that one of the biggest problems is the constant turnout, by people such as David Nelson, David Matthews and David Bentley, to traumatic events. That has a huge toll and it is not sufficiently recognised by our agencies and departments. We found that people who turn out regularly and start to experience post-traumatic stress eventually wind up leaving, retiring from the service on medical grounds, and we do not look after them well enough.

I will go to some of the findings and recommendations that the committee put forward. I sincerely hope that the government treats this report with the respect that is due to it, not because we did a report that we think is excellent, but because what the government does has an effect on the people who are our first responders and who show up every day to work and go out and ensure people are extracted from emergency situations, hopefully, mostly alive, but, sadly, sometimes it is a recovery process of taking bodies out. The committee’s first finding is —

The Western Australian Government has yet to present to Parliament its harmonised version of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*. Current Western Australian legislation does not include a definition for ‘health’ that includes psychological health.

Although we look after the physical health of our staff and volunteers, we do not have anything in our legislation that recognises psychological health. That is a huge problem because it means that the heads of our agencies do not turn their minds to the fact that they have many, many officers and many, many volunteers who have, or can have, psychological problems. Therefore, we recommend that —

The Western Australian Government amend current State occupational health and safety legislation so that it includes a definition for ‘health’ that includes psychological health.

We think that is very important, so we made it a recommendation right up-front. We also found that none of the state emergency agencies has mechanisms for tracking their staff and the number of traumatic events that they have attended over a particular period. Whether it be the police, the State Emergency Service, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority or St John Ambulance, none of those agencies has a system for tracking which officers show up to what events, to keep it on record so that they can go back and say, “This person has attended three fatalities over the last three or 12 months.” There is no method for determining whether they have attended a fatality in which a child has been involved. Throughout the inquiry, we found that the death of a child or the involvement of a child in a traumatic situation has a greater effect on all our volunteers and State Emergency Service workers than other situations. The committee has recommended that that be taken into account and that the Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment, and Police ensure that their departments develop, as a high priority, a computer system for tracking their staff and the number of traumatic events they have attended over a period. This information is vital a number of years after an event when one of our volunteers or agency staff is suffering from depression or post-traumatic stress and starting to show signs. These signs do not show up immediately. Sometimes it takes years and sometimes it might only take months, but this is one of the things that we fail on very badly. We must ensure that we have a link back to all the events that our officers and volunteers have attended.

In dealing with stressful events, the committee also found that chaplains are a great source of relief for our first responders. We have recommended that the chaplaincy service be expanded within those departments. Our finding reads —

Chaplains play a critical role in preparing emergency agency staff for, and in responding to, stress from a disaster or critical incident. However, Western Australia Police and FESA welfare sections have fewer chaplains (both full-time and volunteer) than similar services in other Australian jurisdictions. The Department for Child Protection and the Department of Environment and Conservation currently do not employ a chaplain.

Our recommendation reads —

The Ministers for Environment, Police, Child Protection and Emergency Services fund additional chaplaincy services, particularly for staff and volunteers based in rural and regional Western Australia.

One of our other findings was that many of the resources to deal with stress and trauma are based in the city and do not get out to rural and regional areas. We recommended that some of those resources be deployed to rural and regional areas so that we can support our agency staff and volunteers in those agencies. From the evidence received, it is apparent that sometimes it can be worse for those working in rural and regional areas because quite often when they show up at a traffic accident, a house fire or some other form of incident, there is a good chance that they will know the victims, but they still do their job in a professional manner, whether they be volunteers or career people, and then they go off and deal with the consequences—quite often on their own.

The committee found that peer support for the fire service in New Orleans was provided by retired fire officers. Peer support was one of the initial forms of support to officers who attended traumatic situations, and we found that retired officers were able to support the serving officers at the time it was needed. Our finding reads —

The peer support officer programs of Western Australia Police and the Fire and Emergency Service Authority appear to be less well-resourced than similar organisations in other Australian jurisdictions.

We recommended —

The Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Police provide additional resources so that the Fire and Emergency Services Authority and the Western Australia Police can at least double their number of peer support officers, with an aim to increase the number in regional areas of the State.

It appeared to the committee that the peer support officers process works so well because they did the same job as the people they deal with do, and they understand what that person is going through and are able to counsel them and refer them for further counselling if necessary. That initial contact is vital. It is vital to get the first responder talking and thinking about the issues or events they have just attended to ensure that they do not play on their minds too much. The peer support officers can see the signs and know when they need to keep an eye on a certain person. Peer support is vital.

I thank the nearly 160 staff in the emergency response agencies in Western Australia and in other jurisdictions who willingly gave their time and expertise to the committee during the course of this inquiry. We applaud their professionalism in undertaking dangerous and sometimes traumatic tasks that most Western Australians will never have to encounter. Their evidence was important, as much of it was not available from more normal research sources such as the internet. We collected evidence from 18 submissions and we received evidence in hearings from the state’s main first-responder agencies, particularly Western Australia Police, FESA and St John

Ambulance. We also gathered evidence from other state agencies that play a critical role in responding to disasters—the Department of Health, the Coroner’s Court, the Department for Child Protection, the Department of Environment and Conservation, and the Department of Education. We took evidence from the unions representing those first-responder agencies. We also took evidence from the Australian Red Cross, the State Emergency Service Volunteers Association of Western Australia and the WA Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association, as well as the metropolitan sea rescue groups.

We also heard evidence from five experts in disaster mental health and trauma, who have agreed that their evidence can be made public. I thank and acknowledge those five people—Professor Richard Bryant of the University of New South Wales; Dr Craig Katz of the Mt Sinai Medical Center, who was also the supervising psychiatrist of the World Trade Center worker–volunteer and mental health monitoring and treatment program; Professor Jerry Jacobs, director of the Disaster Mental Health Institute at the University of Southern Dakota; Professor David Forbes, director of the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, Victoria; and Dr Rob Gordon, consultant psychologist to the Victorian emergency management plan and the international operations department of the Australian Red Cross. Many people gave evidence and we tapped into a lot of expertise from all around the world, which enabled us to deliver this report.

The report has 23 recommendations and 27 findings. I hope that in the next three months, when the government responds to this report, we will see a much greater emphasis on taking care of not only the physical health, but also the psychological health of our people.

I also acknowledge the staff of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee—Dr David Worth, principal research officer, and Jovita Hogan. We all know that without these staff, the committee could not do its job. They put in endless hours of research, and they listen to us fumbling through the report sometimes, querying evidence that we have heard, and trying to understand some of the more technical aspects of the evidence.

I also thank the committee members. The now deputy chair, Rob Johnson, the member for Hillarys, has joined the committee only recently, and although he did not take part in collecting the evidence for this report, he helped us in putting the report together. Unfortunately, the member for Hillarys is not available this morning to speak to this report. I also thank the former deputy chair of the committee, Albert Jacob, the member for Ocean Reef, who was right into this report until he was appointed parliamentary secretary and had to resign from the committee. I think the member for Ocean Reef will be given 10 minutes, after other members of the committee have spoken this morning, to speak to the report.

I also thank Margaret Quirk, the member for Girrawheen, and Ian Britza, the member for Morley. I think it was a pincer movement from Margaret and Ian that got us to undertake this inquiry in the first place. They came into the committee—I think they had probably had a little discussion beforehand—and put to us the notion that we needed to address this issue for our volunteers and for the career people in our agencies. I also thank Hon Tom Stephens, the member for Pilbara, who has many years of experience in this place and the other place, and who was able to give insightful questioning to some of our other witnesses, particularly departmental people, and get out of them the information that we needed to put this report together. I thank all those people.

I also, once again, acknowledge our career firefighters, our career police officers, our St John Ambulance people, and all our volunteers across this state. We cannot ever forget that this state cannot run its fire and emergency services and its other emergency services without the many thousands of volunteers—I think in the report we say that it is 50 000—across the state who contribute to making this state a great place in which to live.

MS M.M. QUIRK (Girrawheen) [10.31 am]: At the start, I thank the committee research staff, Dr David Worth and Jovita Hogan, for their professional and assiduous endeavours and assistance to the committee on this inquiry.

I also acknowledge at the outset the many witnesses who courageously related their personal stories. In this inquiry, there was a tension between the imperative to glean detailed evidence and the very real prospect that we were asking witnesses to relay painful recollections. They did so, however, in the hope that others in the future would not encounter the same problems they have had to painfully face, often without any assistance whatsoever.

When we set up the inquiry, we contemplated that we were concerned principally with the impact of major disasters. But it became apparent that whether the cause of post-traumatic stress disorder—PTSD—was a catastrophic event or something much more routine for emergency workers, in both cases the way it had to be addressed was very similar.

Personally, I found this inquiry life-affirming. We heard stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in trying, unpredictable and dangerous circumstances. We heard many stories of how the death of a child has a profound impact on a first responder even years after the event. We heard of ethical dilemmas and decisions

having to be made on the spot as to who to rescue and who to leave behind. That is a decision no-one should be forced to make. We heard of situations in which first responders had to leave their own homes and families—also victims—to go elsewhere and save others.

The inquiry reinforced in me the belief that we are extraordinarily lucky in Western Australia to have the calibre of first responders that we have—police; firefighters, both career and volunteer; ambulance drivers; community protection workers; and volunteers in non-government agencies, such as the Red Cross. They are collectively a courageous and selfless lot. But what this inquiry shows is that we cannot take these people for granted. We must value them.

There were some unforgettable moments during this inquiry. I remember fondly meeting our New Zealand cousins in Christchurch. Before our visit to Christchurch, I did not fully appreciate the enormity of the challenge that they faced and continue to face. Since we visited Christchurch, there have been thousands of minor tremors and aftershocks, and two or three significant quakes. I now know how painful memories will come flooding back on each occasion. That is a great burden to live with. Then there were the two brothers whom we met in New Orleans, retired but lively firefighters, who had been trained by their New York colleagues to act as peer supports for New Orleans firefighters deeply affected by the chaos and devastation of hurricane Katrina. Their compassion, sense of humour and selfless commitment to their brother firefighters was inspiring.

I also recall a wonderful psychiatrist at Mt Sinai Medical Center in New York, who accidentally fell into the role of assisting the first responders at 9/11, and it has now become his life’s work, with many patients still battling with what they had to deal with that day and during the months of recovery effort. The account of his work was done with great humility and self-deprecation.

There were, of course, many home-grown examples that made a similar impact on us—in particular, Dave Matthews, a former police officer, who in 1989 was called to a domestic dispute in which a man was threatening to kill people with a knife. After trying to negotiate, Dave shot the man, who died instantly. From Mr Matthews’ evidence, he soldiered on, until in 1994 he was involved in a siege in which a person was shot and killed by the tactical response group. After that, Mr Matthews recounts, “I was an absolute mess.” His long struggle subsequently and treatment within WA Police reads like a “how not to” guide for managers. I am gratified that Mr Matthews recently received an ex gratia payment; but no money could adequately compensate him for the way he was treated over a prolonged period of time. The committee also visited Margaret River and talked to a number of first responders involved in the fires. Even though the committee members are not trained, it was apparent even to us that the psychological scars are deep amongst a number of those personnel.

What our inquiries from other jurisdictions demonstrate is that these large disasters have assisted in our understanding of how to address PTSD, and how to build into our emergency workers some level of resilience. Also, and most importantly, we know that although the traumatic event may not be able to be prevented, the impact on individual first responders can be mitigated if agencies provide resources and train managers to act thoughtfully in dealing with their personnel. We must acknowledge, however, that the human psyche cannot be continually assaulted by trauma without there being inevitable consequences. We know that PTSD can manifest itself many months, and often years, after a traumatic event. It affects different people in different ways, and there should be sufficient flexibility within our emergency agencies to allow for this. We also found that it was unfortunately common for the symptoms of PTSD to be misinterpreted by ill-informed managers not adequately trained to identify the symptoms and act appropriately. We know that these symptoms can include increased alcohol or drug consumption, marital breakdown, belligerent and challenging behaviours at work, and insomnia. Repeated exposure can greatly compound the damage, and the oft-cited example is the prolonged exposure, often over many years, to road trauma. Yet that is something that is encountered in particular by our volunteers in regional WA, and by our long-serving police and firefighters in the city.

In terms of the recommendations, in agencies such as FESA and WAPOL it is fundamental that they have a mechanism for tracking the number of events an individual attends. We know that PTSD can be cumulative, and these agencies have a duty of care not to aggravate this condition. Not only is this a moral obligation, but also if agencies re-expose an officer, it will expose the agency almost certainly to legal liability and hefty damages.

The committee found that in recent times, the level of peer support has decreased in some agencies, or is at best patchy. We believe that as well as psychological first aid, peer support should be given the highest priority.

I want to acknowledge the terrific work of the chaplains at both WA Police and FESA. Ron Wingate, the chaplain at FESA, gave evidence. From my observations of Ron over a few years now, I find him to be a humble man who understates the significance of his role. It is clear he needs a colleague to assist him to cover this vast state.

Overall, the body of knowledge on PTSD is now substantial. There is simply no excuse for agencies to ignore, and in many cases compound, a condition that, after all, was acquired in the course of serving the community in the most stressful and dangerous of situations.

MR T.G. STEPHENS (Pilbara) [10.40 am]: I want to join with my colleagues firstly in acknowledging the collective work that was done by the team of which I was pleased to be a part: the chairman, Tony O’Gorman, the member for Joondalup, whose work bought this together; Margaret Quirk, the member for Girrawheen, whose interests and portfolio areas have led us to this inquiry; Ian Britza, the member for Morley, who, in collaboration with the member for Girrawheen, has a shared interest in and preoccupation with this area of the welfare of the first responders; Albert Jacob, the member for Ocean Reef; and latterly the member for Hillarys, Rob Johnson.

I have had the opportunity of doing work on a large number of parliamentary committees in the years I have been in the Parliament, and I appreciate that committee reports and the committee work are some of the most significant legacy that we contribute to Western Australia as part of our parliamentary work. Some of our number leave massive infrastructure—I think of people such as Minister MacTiernan, who left railway lines—and others write books, such as Martin Whitely, the member for Bassendean, whose legacy will live on beyond his parliamentary career through his contribution in other areas. For many of us, the parliamentary work we do and the committee reports that we leave are important not simply for the long-term legacy, but hopefully for their immediate impact upon administration. That work is not done by us alone. It is done with the support of teams from the committee staff—in this case, principal research officer Dr David Worth and research officer Ms Jovita Hogan. They are part of a quality team at the committee office that make a report such as this possible and of use to government, the government sector and the community more widely.

This particular work created the opportunity for us to take evidence from witnesses not only in Western Australia, but also, as has been mentioned, in New Zealand on what was a very memorable trip for me. It was an extraordinary eye-opener to see the physical impacts of the series of earthquakes in Christchurch upon its population and upon its first responders, the emergency personnel, police, ambulance people and the hospital teams—all the people who got caught up responding to that enormous tragedy of the Christchurch earthquakes. It is something that people cannot appreciate, no matter how much they see it on TV or in the media, until they go and walk amongst the devastation there and speak directly with the people who have been impacted.

I was not lucky enough to have had the opportunity to do the other work in visiting New York or New Orleans. They are visits that I would very much like to have done, but for personal reasons was not able to. I appreciate the hard work that was done by committee members in undertaking that arduous travel and bringing back to the committee the research work they undertook in both those locations, but I was pleased to have been part of most of the other hearings, and in particular to have heard from emergency personnel and former police officers, some of whom, as we have heard, are with us in the chamber today. That evidence has certainly guided the framework within which the report has been constructed and the recommendations before government.

I want to speak in defence of committee reports such as this. I say to governments, to ministers and to the systems of government—the public service—that have the task of responding to inquiries such as these: do not underestimate the value of parliamentary reports such as this in shaping and guiding the response of the public sector, of government, to the needs of our community. This report lands with all its collective wisdom of people and the parliamentary team who put it together—people at the coalface of parliamentary life and service to the community, some of whom have had short terms and some of whom have had long terms of parliamentary service, and who have helped shape this report with the support of quality officers. A report such as this begs to be taken seriously by government not only in the individual responses to people who have to deal with the trauma and legacy of their work as first responders in emergency situations, but also in building a response in the longer term within the public sector and within the community.

I must say that this area of work—the emergency services sector—has not been a particular preoccupation of mine as a parliamentarian. It has been an eye-opener to see the interests of others on the committee who have a preoccupation with emergency services teams. My interests, I guess, have been focused in this work on a bigger and wider issue that I want to mention, although it is not within the report. I am speaking to parliamentarians who will continue to work within our community beyond my term as a parliamentarian. I am interested in the strategies that just assume resilience within our communities; we simply rely on people to be resilient. When we find it, we take it for granted and we simply assume that is the way things are. It is like community leadership; when we get it, we are lucky for it, but we then simply spend the good fortune of resilience or leadership that is ours and do not, in my view, do the work that is necessary to make resilience and leadership part of the community that makes up all facets of life within Western Australia, including the emergency services personnel who desperately need good leadership within their organisations, good peer support and good resilience skills.

Although this recommendation is not made in the report—it would have been outside the committee’s terms of reference, I guess—in my contribution to the chamber I want to say that, as well as getting the emergency services organisations to embed these principles and processes that are recommended in the report, we have to find ways of making sure that in the community of Western Australia, and more widely in the nation of which we are a part and the globe of which we are a part, we build resilience and leadership skills within people, so that we do not simply take for granted that people will look after one another. We need to work hard at ensuring that in our family life, our school life and our community life, the notion of turning to one another and asking, “Are you okay? What can we do to work with you?” simply becomes second nature, and that it is not just stuff that is accidental or fortuitous but, rather, is embedded in the way we look after one another as fellow human beings.

It is a shock when we find that systems do not do this—as is outlined in this report—and have not done this historically. With the adoption of this report, those structures and systems will be the better for it. But there is work still to be done to build up within our schools, within our parent education programs and within our wider community leadership skills and support for one another so that it becomes second nature. I can tell members that even in institutions such as Parliament, parliamentary life has its traumas. It would be a rare person in this place or in parliamentary life who finds people who intuitively look to support people through the traumas that elections bring—the ups and downs of elections; elections deliver great body blows in parliamentary life—and that should be embedded in not only our institutional life, but also our life as a state. There is work to be done in this area. I commend the report, the quality of the work and the wider work that is needed.

MR I.M. BRITZA (Morley) [10.50 am]: I am honoured to speak to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee’s tenth report, “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers”. I am honoured also that I initially presented this inquiry to the committee. Many years ago I was fortunate and privileged to spend a full day with a police forensic team in New South Wales. I accompanied them to the place of death of a little child and pastored and counselled the parents while the forensic team did their investigation and examination. It was while speaking with those men and women that I formed the opinion that someday something should be done to assist these groups of men and women who serve our community on the front line, where many others in our community do not desire to go or participate in and confront death on a regular basis.

The committee inquiry focused primarily on those organisations that confront fatal trauma in the midst of a natural or man-made disaster. It was an outstanding inquiry, in my opinion, led admirably by our chairman and competently and adeptly assisted by our research officers, Dr David Worth and Ms Jovita Hogan, whose input and insight were gratefully received and gladly acted upon.

It was sometimes a very tender, emotional, moving, touching, disturbing, distressing, alarming and painful experience to listen to witnesses from our national fire disasters, the Christchurch earthquake, hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the 9/11 disaster in New York, to name just a few. Listening to the front-line workers tell their stories only strengthened my resolve and determination to see this inquiry make a difference for the men and women of our great state of Western Australia.

I draw the attention of the house to a couple of recommendations that I would like to personally highlight. Recommendation 11 states —

The Ministers for Health, Police, and Emergency Services ensure that the Western Australia Police, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority and St John Ambulance establish a formal platform to share their knowledge and experience in delivering programs to their staff and volunteers to address issues of stress from disasters and critical incidents, as is done in other Australian jurisdictions.

The distressing reality is that all these agencies still do not adequately share information, especially in the area of the effects of fatal trauma on the staff and volunteers. This is simply intolerable and needs to be changed.

Recommendation 12 states —

The Ministers for Environment, Police, Child Protection and Emergency Services fund additional chaplaincy services, particularly for staff and volunteers based in rural and regional Western Australia.

The absolute necessity of the role of chaplains on the front line of disasters was widely accepted as a necessary and vital tool by the vast majority of those agencies that participated in road traffic fatalities as well as natural disasters. The committee spoke to several witnesses who had been to fatal incidents many, many times and had not received any input at all. It was absolutely amazing that these men and women had not been spoken to and sometimes had been told to just get on with life. For most of us, if we experience seeing a death once, we find it traumatic, yet these people confront the worst possible scenarios that are too horrendous for us to even think about. To be told to just have a drink and, “She’ll be right”, is just amazing. It made me feel even more determined to do something that would make a difference to the emergency agencies in our state.

The last recommendation I want to draw to the attention of the house is recommendation 22, which states —

The Fire and Emergency Services Authority, Department of Environment and Conservation and Western Australia Police explore the usefulness of using retired staff as mentors or peer supporters, either directly employed or through a suitable nongovernment organisation.

The use of retired emergency staff as mentors or peer supporters has proved valuable overseas and is well supported by all agencies that gave evidence to the committee. Although some agencies expressed a little caution, which amazed me, quite frankly, about the role that mentors had to play, they all agreed that their participation was certainly vital to those who strongly felt that only those who had experienced what they had experienced and confronted could actually help them deal with the results of participating in fatal traumatic events. The resistance in some quarters to the role that mentors had was surprising to me because I would have thought that it would have been commonly accepted that it was good to talk to someone who knew and understood the situations that people on the front line face. I am glad that we brought it up.

I strongly urge and recommend that the government carefully read and study the report and implement as many of the recommendations as possible that the committee has carefully and dutifully advocated. I acknowledge my colleagues on the committee. I thank them for their input, encouragement, support and contribution to an inquiry that was well and truly worthy of our time, effort and endeavour. I wholeheartedly recommend this report to the house.

MR A.P. JACOB (Ocean Reef — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.56 am] — by leave: I had the privilege of being on this inquiry for the past 12 months. I left the committee only in recent weeks. At the outset, I acknowledge the member for Morley. He was the first to suggest that the committee should inquire into this matter and he convinced us of the merits of pursuing this inquiry. I believe not only that the member for Morley can rightly claim that he instigated this report, but also that it will be attributed to his advocacy when much more attention is paid to this topic in the future. I thank and acknowledge the chair, the member for Joondalup, for his kind words in the chair’s foreword as well as for the leadership that he showed in his role as chair on this inquiry. I also thank the members for Pilbara and Girrawheen for their efforts on this inquiry. I am sure that the member for Girrawheen, as the shadow spokesperson for this area, will have many more opportunities to raise this subject. I also acknowledge at the beginning—because sometimes I forget to do it at the end—the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee research staff, Dr David Worth and Ms Jovita Hogan, for all their work.

The experience of this inquiry, more than any other in my four years on the committee, has given me a very positive appreciation for how the committee system can most usefully advocate for and advance members in a parliamentary democracy. The committee prides itself on never having had a minority report; I believe it is the only committee that has not. That culture has been fostered by members on both sides. Unlike what can often happen with committees, this report has not been an attempt to politicise an issue. I think that both sides have recognised that this is an area in which everyone has fallen short in recent years. This inquiry is a way to raise the profile of this issue and do extensive study, and extensive study certainly has been done. The inquiry can also promote ways in which the state government of the day can better look after its staff, particularly its emergency service staff and its volunteers.

Although circumstances meant that I did not get to see the draft report, I had the great privilege in participating in most of the inquiry’s work, albeit I did not travel with the committee to either the United States or Melbourne. However, I had the opportunity to briefly peruse the report and the great privilege of being in the vast majority of hearings and briefings that were held. The committee has done a number of reports over the past four years, but this is probably its most accessible inquiry. It would have been easy to arrive at a far larger report when collating close to 18 months’ worth of work, but it has been boiled down to what is vital.

I turn to some of the key impressions that I gathered during the inquiry. Although this particular report has been a good foray into the general effects of trauma, it focused specifically on disasters, which was entirely appropriate, particularly at the front end because a committee needs a focus going into an inquiry. However, I came to the opinion during the course of the inquiry that, from a state perspective, much more work needs to be done about the cumulative effects of trauma, particularly for those who perform emergency service work day in, day out. It became apparent as we moved through the inquiry that although many people struggle after being exposed to a rare, one-off event—such as the Christchurch earthquake—many more struggle because of what they face day in, day out carrying out the responsibilities that their job requires of them. A lot more work needs to be done in this area. This report is a good starting point. The monitoring of cumulative effects over time seems to be the key. I acknowledge, and it is intuitively apparent, that people react differently to different triggers. People have varying levels of resilience; indeed, whereas one person considers an incident to be high impact, another person would not. A good start would be trying to find some means of measuring and monitoring how

frequently an individual has had to attend critical or high-impact scenarios and keeping track of that as they progress through their career.

Other members have mentioned peer support in an organisation being absolutely key. Exit interviews need a lot more work. Overall, we need to foster a culture of it being okay, in the first instance, to have the symptoms of not coping and, secondly, to seek help. Those are the two overarching principles I would encourage us all to take from this report.

In closing I also acknowledge the former officers known as “The Daves”, who are in the Speaker’s gallery. They were retired medically unfit and had to find each other to gain some support. I thank all three of them for coming forward. Their evidence made a particularly strong impression on the committee and, more than they realise, impacted the direction that the inquiry took. I thank all three men for coming forward and for their forthrightness. I hope that this inquiry is just the beginning of more work in this area.