

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECOGNITION AND ADEQUACY
OF THE RESPONSES BY STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES
TO EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA BY WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS
ARISING FROM DISASTERS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT BRISBANE
FRIDAY, 6 JULY 2012**

SESSION THREE

Members

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)
Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.G. Stephens**

Hearing commenced at 1.55 pm

EVANS, DR BEN

**Regional Director, Queensland, Australian Customs and Border Protection Service
Customs House,
20-22 The Circuit,
Airport Village,
QLD, 4007, examined:**

POLLOCK, MS REBECCA

**Manager, Regional People Services, Queensland, Australian Customs and Border Protection Service
19 Barron Street,
Gordon Park,
QLD 4031, examined:**

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The purpose of this meeting is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into the recognition and adequacy of the responses by state government agencies with experience of trauma by workers and volunteers arising from disasters. I would like to introduce myself again. I am the Deputy Chairman, Albert Jacob. I am a member for a metropolitan seat called Ocean Reef. To my right is Margaret Quirk, who is the member for Girrawheen, also a Perth metropolitan seat, and Hon Tom Stephens, who is the member for Pilbara. His electorate is about the same size of Victoria, I think!

The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of Parliament of Western Australia. The committee may look to use the information that it receives today as part of its deliberations for its final report.

Before we proceed to the questions we have for you today, have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

The Witnesses: We have, thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to appearing at today’s briefing?

The Witnesses: No, thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: To start off, you are probably not the most automatic fit for the inquiry, but we had heard very good things about what you do as an organisation in this area. I was wondering if you could please tell us about Australian Customs processes for dealing with staff stress and critical incidents and anything that you think we could take away as part of our inquiry and things we could maybe recommend to other organisations.

Dr Evans: With the committee’s indulgence I might make some opening comments about our organisation and what we do. I am sure you are very familiar with that, but if you could indulge me and please interrupt if I am telling you anything you already know. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon. I am sorry about this morning’s confusion but I am very, very glad to be here.

As you are aware, the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service is a commonwealth agency. We are the primary border protection agency for Australia. Our constitutional head of power is section 90 of the constitution, which gives the commonwealth power over collection of customs duties, excise and bounties. I should say we do not have any bounties left anymore. We used to collect bounties on ships, but we do not anymore.

I will give you a brief overview of what the organisation does. I am sure all of you have travelled through international airports so you will be familiar with one large part of our business. We have approximately 5,600 staff distributed around Australia. Each week on average we clear approximately 268,000 passengers arriving in Australia over 1,600 flights. We clear about 260 ships arriving in Australian ports from overseas and we board about 137 of those a week for inspection. There are about 14 small craft that arrive in Australian ports from overseas per week and we clear approximately 24,600 export entries, 268,000 air way bills and 48,500 sea cargo manifest lines for imported cargo. We also conduct surveillance activity over about three million square nautical miles of Australia's maritime domain and we combat multiple maritime threats. You would be most familiar with our operations in the people smuggling space at this time. We also patrol in the Southern Ocean and northern waters. We also patrol and do our work at airports, seaports, remote coast lines and mail centres.

In Queensland we have 747 staff spread across 14 sites. We have 589 of those staff in Brisbane with the remainder distributed across Coolangatta, Bundaberg, Gladstone, Mackay, Bowen, Townsville, Cairns, Weipa and Thursday Island. We are spread right up and down the coast. About half of our officers are on shift work. That will become quite important when we talk about supporting our staff in circumstances of disaster management.

In terms of the questions the committee may have, Rebecca and I will be happy to assist where we can. I presume that if you ask me something I do not know, I can take that on notice and I will happily provide written answers within the committee's time frames. I would also mention that perhaps a productive line of conversation, with the committee's indulgence, depending on your questions, would be how we, as an organisation, handled the Brisbane floods of about a year ago, which is probably the nearest we have come in this particular region to a major disaster.

[2.00 pm]

I would also be happy to talk about the arrangements we have in place in, for example, our office in Cairns to deal with cyclone management, which is the other major impact on our staff and on our business in this part of the world. In terms of some of the more traumatic events that our officers have had to deal with such as the sinking of SIEV 221 at Christmas Island, I am not in a position to answer specific questions on that, but I would certainly refer you to the transcript of the coronial inquest, which does go some way to how we supported our officers through that ordeal and continue to do so with the latest SIEV sinking that our officers have responded to.

Customs and border protection is generally not a first response organisation. We are not like a police force. That said, we do have officers who carry firearms. Approximately 600 of our officers, about 10% of our workforce, are now armed. They do things like patrol the waterfront and they patrol our maritime zones. So, they do from time to time act as first responders. They are first aid trained to a high level and do end up responding to events that do have a traumatic impact.

That is probably a sufficient preamble from me. I am more than happy to take any questions that the committee may have.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Just more specifically, I guess, in your structures and systems around helping staff deal with stress or in particular traumatic situations—they do not necessarily have to be associated around a disaster. The Christmas Island one is almost an ideal one and I take your comments there, but how would you deal with similar circumstances here in Queensland?

Dr Evans: I suppose there are two ways of looking at our structure for dealing with this. We have business as usual. I will come back to what that means. Then we have our capacity to respond to particular incidents, be they incidents that affect a single officer or incidents that affect a large part of our workforce.

Business as usual: my colleague Rebecca belongs to something called regional people services. We have regional people services officers in every region and their job is the usual human resources

work. They look after officers' queries about pay and conditions, fixed-term assignments, placements away from their home location, which, as you can imagine, in Queensland is a large issue with the number of ports we have up the coast. But they also have a key role in monitoring the welfare of our staff. They provide advice to supervisors and managers of staff about looking for signs that staff are under stress. Regrettably, we also then have to provide a response to harassment claims, to staff who are under stress, staff who require leave to cope with particular personal or other circumstances. We have a sort of fairly strong business-as-usual component in our regional offices so that we can respond to the requirements of our staff on that day-to-day basis.

We then have arrangements where we can under certain circumstances call in specific counsellors to assist staff. Generally, we try to give our officers as much freedom as possible in that respect. In other words, we will say to them, "We recommend that you call our counselling service," rather than say, "You must go to our counselling service." But we can also intervene in that way if we need to. I can come back to circumstances under which we do that. Examples of that would include if we have an officer who has a family member who dies, particularly under traumatic circumstances such as accidental death or death by suicide, we then make strong efforts to provide counselling and support. Our officers also informally run a staff welfare fund. Officers can join that fund. We all put in a dollar a fortnight, which over time builds up a significant amount of money and that welfare money can step in to provide services to officers when they are under stress. So, for example, right down to things like house cleaning, funeral expenses and a range of other things. We have informal as well as formal factors to respond to individual circumstances of personal tragedy.

Where we do have something more disastrous, such as SIEV 221 or the Brisbane floods, for example, we mobilise our contracted counsellors as a matter of course. We fly them in. We make formal arrangements for officers to have appointments with them. Officers can, obviously, refuse that service, but we strongly encourage it and we make every effort to make sure that the counsellors are available on the ground. For example, if I had reason to believe, as we have in the past in some other offices, that we have staff members who are at risk of particular stress—for example, at risk of suicide; we identify officers this way from time to time—I would fly counsellors in for that to try to intervene ahead of anything happening. I suppose the subtext to that is we place a lot of responsibility on our supervisors and managers of staff to know their staff, to be looking after the health and wellbeing of their staff and to monitor their staff's behaviour, attendance, other indicators that an officer maybe under stress. That is really our business-as-usual side.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So you say you fly in. That is, obviously, if you are talking about regional, but Brisbane you would have people.

Ms Pollock: Yes, we have people on staff at our EAP provider who are available here —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Which one is your EAP provider?

Ms Pollock: PPC Worldwide.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Is there any issue about the fact that, if you like, they are not doing the same work, so they are not talking the talk of those people?

Dr Evans: We rely on people such as my colleague Rebecca to provide that interface. As the regional director, I also make myself available to officers. The EAP provider is to provide the formal qualified counselling service, which is not specific to the business. It is specific to the circumstances that are causing the individual stress.

Ms Pollock: Because they have been working with us for some time, they have an understanding of our business and based on the type of people they might see who just go to see them for personal circumstances have built up a good knowledge of how we work and what our environment is like. Generally, in the conversations I have had with them they have a good understanding of the challenges for our staff.

Dr Evans: That is probably an important point to make. EAP is available to our officers without management intervention. If an officer feels that they do need to talk to someone, they can contact them through our website or by telephone and management does not have to ask them to do it. They can always make that contact if they so choose. But under circumstances where we identify causes of stress, we will seek to influence and emphasise to our officers that they should seek assistance.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Is there either induction or management training, at any stage—any psychological first aid training done?

Ms Pollock: We have provided that. It is not necessarily on induction, but we run regular sessions on that type of training. We have just done some recently with mental health awareness in the workplace.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Who is that pitched at?

Ms Pollock: We aim to reach anyone who supervises staff. It can be challenging at the lower levels, because we have a lot more immediate team leader supervisors and in a shift environment it can be challenging to get across all of them. It does tend to be your more middle management and up that are easier to reach for that.

Dr Evans: One of the things we have discovered that places our officers under a lot of pressure is we have a large number of officers who have to examine objectionable material. Under regulation 4A of the federal import regulations, our officers make the initial assessment as to whether something should be referred to the classification board.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So you are talking about pornography?

Dr Evans: Pornography, the really objectionable end of pornography—so bestiality, child exploitation material. This necessarily puts our officers under a lot of stress. So, we have instituted a regular series of wellness checks that we perform for those officers on a regular basis. Those are mandatory; officers who do not undertake the wellness checks are not asked to examine objectionable material. That is another example of a day-to-day or business-as-usual stress.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: How frequently would they have to undergo that?

Ms Pollock: It depends on their level of risk of exposure. If they are in a high-risk area, such as our investigations area, it will be every six months. There is also then follow-up after they have left that area for up to two years afterwards. For those in a lower risk, it is lower thresholds.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: How many personnel are we talking about in the total organisation?

Dr Evans: Nationally, we could have easily over 1,000 staff who would be exposed to this material, but, as Rebecca says, it would be at different levels. For example, any officer at an airport could be exposed to this material because they will inspect someone's bag —

[2.10 pm]

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: Sorry, I was really meaning about your organisation in Queensland, for instance. How big is your organisation in terms of personnel?

Dr Evans: In Queensland we have 787 staff. Nationally, it is about 5,600. Sorry, I misunderstood the question.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: You have PPC Worldwide. I imagine over time in Customs you end up with a bit of a culture within the organisation itself and there may be a bit of a reluctance to speak to those external counsellors. Do you have an internal peer support system running in your teams as well?

Dr Evans: Informally. I mentioned the staff welfare fund, which is one example of that. You are right about the culture; Customs and Border Protection does have a particular culture. It is, however, a family-oriented culture in the sense that officers do support each other quite strongly.

One of the beauties of working in the organisation is that level of peer support that we see growing organically.

As far as formal arrangements along that peer support line, we do not have anything in place except to emphasise to supervisors and managers their role in monitoring the wellbeing of their staff. As Rebecca said, we provide formal training called mental health awareness. We try to ensure that every officer who supervises staff at some stage will get that training.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: Why would people have pointed to your organisation as being best practice in this area? What is it?

Dr Evans: I think we are a large organisation that has achieved a bit of press lately of dealing with traumatic circumstances. I think the SIEV-221 is probably the example that has brought it front of mind. Beyond that, I am not quite sure why we have been referred to you.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: So apart from the press, though, is there something that your organisation specifically did in reference to this incident that might have led people to think that —

Dr Evans: We were very quick to fly trained counsellors out to Christmas Island to deal with the staff. We were certainly well ahead of any other organisation to do that. For example, our Defence colleagues generally wait for people to come back to Australia before they institute counselling services being available. They have very sophisticated processes for dealing with people returning from Afghanistan, for example, but it does mean that it has to happen once people have returned to Australia. I think we got on to the front foot in terms of getting our counselling team out to Christmas Island almost immediately that the incident had occurred. We were very responsive to that and I think that is what brought it front of mind for people.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I have to say, for myself, personally, as we have gone down the course of this inquiry, I have found that a lot of the interesting areas are not just critical incidents and disasters, but it is also cumulative effect. That is certainly something that you will see in those high-risk areas. You made a comment earlier, Rebecca, about not only those ones in the high-risk area having a 12-month mandatory check-up, but also following that on for two years after they have transitioned out of that. That is, I think, the first time I have heard of an organisation doing that follow-up later as well, because there certainly does seem to be a latent effect in a lot of the post-traumatic stress areas. My query on that in the first instance is: do you move those people out of those areas if they have done an amount of time there and you have seen that they have had a number of high-risk incidents?

Ms Pollock: The one key element of that particular type of work is that it is purely voluntary. Staff do not have to do it if they do not feel comfortable doing it. There are certain rules in place about how long you can view and what type of breaks you must have, and records must be kept of how much of that you are doing. So, it is monitored in that respect. What we will find is that a lot of staff in those areas are very dedicated to their job and they are generally very good at their job, so they tend to stay in those areas for some time. They like that type of work. But if somebody did get to that point, we certainly—generally it would be voluntary that they would want to move and decide that it is not quite right for them anymore and that they can no longer perform what the role requires. So, then we would support in them finding an alternative placement. Customs does already have a mobility policy where staff can move between different job roles. So, that really helps facilitate that.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: If they are coming out of a high-risk area, are they required to have those check-ups for the following two years?

Ms Pollock: That is a recent introduction to our policy that has just come in. Yes, that is what we are putting in place. We will be keeping records of the staff and ensuring that that follow-up is done.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: If they as an individual feel, say, five years down the road—they may have left Customs altogether and gone into another career, but there are some things that have followed them, is there still the service provision available?

Dr Evans: Yes, the commonwealth would provide that through its ComSuper arrangements. We have Comcare, which would provide that service. This is an area where we do keep impeccable records for exactly that reason; so that there is a clear causal chain so that, yes, when someone is affected five years down the track, they can come back and Comcare can agree that ComSuper arrangements apply to assist that officer.

I should stress with this that we do realise the risk we put officers in by exposing them to this material. The organisation would not dispute a claim of that nature. If someone came back to the organisation five years later and said, “I was exposed to that material”, we would have the records to show that and we certainly would not dispute a claim of that nature, because we realise the risk that we put people in.

If I can return to a point that I think both yourself and Rebecca have alluded to, one of the things we are working very hard on through these wellness checks is self-reporting. You said culturally—as an organisation, if I can use the phrase in a non-sexist way, men are action types and of course they are reluctant to self-report. One of the things we are really working on through our wellness checks is to say to people, “It is okay to self-report and it is okay to walk away.” What we have found with objectionable material particularly is that you often cannot identify what a particular trigger will be with a particular individual. One day it will just be too much. We really put a lot of processes and education in place to say, “It is okay to say no.” That goes for all of our areas where we expose people to dangerous environments—for example, the waterfront, container terminals, or we expose them to objectionable material. So, we are working very hard. It is an uphill battle, but we are working very hard so that officers will say, “Enough is enough”, and the agency can then respond to that appropriately. You are right; you do get people, as Rebecca said, who are very dedicated. They will just keep doing it. Unless their supervisor is monitoring them very closely, which we encourage, they might miss the indicators that something needs to be addressed.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Are you seeing a bit of a generational experience in self-reporting? Say, newer members —

Dr Evans: Customs and Border Protection is at the older end of the demography. Our demographic has not changed very much. Average age in the organisation is still up around 40. We have not necessarily seen a cultural change yet, but I think we will. I agree with you; I think the new generation of officers coming in, who are, of course, receiving more modern and more updated training in this respect—10 years ago or 20 years ago when a lot of our current officers were trained, there was not much thought given to this sort of thing. Officers now receive much more updated training and much more explicit discussion around these sorts of issues and, yes, I expect we will see much better self-reporting. We do have a very good rate of incident reporting. By incident reporting I mean that officers are willing to report a workplace health and safety issue, which could include psychological trauma as well as slips and breakages and those sorts of things. We are seeing good incident reporting, which tells us that people are aware, they are thinking about it and they are willing to say something. I find the picture encouraging.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I take it with an older demographic that you have quite low attrition rates then.

Ms Pollock: We do. A large number of staff have been in the organisation a long time. So, they have certainly been around for the older practices, so that can be challenging to encourage them to —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Implement change.

Ms Pollock: Yes. But then with that, as we said, the Customs family is very supportive of each other and rally around people. That is, I think, a key thing that keeps a lot of people in Customs. You do have that support from your peers and from the staff welfare fund. I receive emails for that probably every week. Someone has heard something that has happened to someone, “Can we help them? Can we give them this?” So it is a really good family response in that way.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Is family included in the Customs family?

Dr Evans: Very much so.

Ms Pollock: Yes. Certainly our service provider—we spread the word that it can include your family as well. “If you have got something going on in your family as well that has got nothing to do with work, please use them as well.” That is what they are there for. So, that is a key element that we do try to push. Certainly the things that come to the staff welfare fund can be about someone’s husband or child. We recently assisted some ex-people who had been in Customs a long time who lost their husband. Recently, an ex-officer who was 90-something died, so we will send something to their funeral. If we hear about it, we like to keep that connection and recognition of the service they have provided with customs.

[2.20 pm]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: The SIEV 221 internal review—I am conscious of the caveat you put, but one of the recommendations was that critical incident support follow-up activity, continues to monitor the ongoing safety and wellbeing of officers directly involved in the incident. I want to ask what that follow-up activity has been.

Dr Evans: It is continuing availability of the counsellors and, because staff do move around in the organisation, ensuring that management teams who, for example, receive a staff member who has been involved in an incident are aware that that is the case so that they can monitor that officer, look for behavioural change, be sensitive to environments they put them into and then ensure that there are referrals made for counselling and other services as needed. It really is about a combination of management attention and continuing to fund services that are available for those staff and also ensuring that we are sensitive to placing officers in workplaces that they may not want to be in as a result of that exposure. For example, we have a very small number of officers whom we probably will not send to sea again, which is fine; we are a large organisation. We can certainly accommodate officers who have restrictions like that, but we ensure that we do not re-expose them to risks that we know will trigger stress.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I do not know if you are familiar with a case in New South Wales called Doherty, which involved a police officer suing for post-traumatic stress.

Dr Evans: I am not familiar with the details, no.

Ms Pollock: No, sorry.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: That saves me asking the question then, so that is all right.

Dr Evans: We have certainly not had an instance like that, but we are aware of that potential. As I say, that is why we keep the records. Certainly where we have records that we, as an organisation, had exposed a person to stress—I mean, you are in a job where you knowingly expose your officers to stressful situations. That is what we are in the business of doing. We keep track of that and we would not dispute a claim.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Do you do any psychometric testing at recruitment stage in terms of possible vulnerability to stress or whatever or is it just the general kind of personality type?

Ms Pollock: For our base level recruitment, which is the bulk of our recruitment in a region—that is, not in Canberra, but in a region—we have done psychometric testing for a number of years for the people who apply for those jobs.

Dr Evans: If you move into a role that is likely to involve—say, if you move into an armed role, if you move into a use-of-force trained role, there is a second layer of psychometric testing that is around exposure and reaction to stressors that takes place to ensure that the officer is, first and foremost, safe to be armed, but also he is in a position that they will respond well to an incident involving the use of a weapon or the use of force.

Ms Pollock: Following on from that, once those staff are in those areas, there is a requirement for them as well as their supervisor to report any change in circumstances that might impact on their psychological wellbeing to remain in that role. That is then referred on and assessed and the officer is usually interviewed by a psychological practitioner and assessed on whether or not they should continue in that role. So, we do already have those arrangements in place.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I get the impression from what are you saying that there does not appear to be a stigma attached to maybe having incidents or maybe having an accumulation of incidents or having a flag along the way.

Dr Evans: As you are aware, Customs and Border Protection has not always been armed. We went through the process of becoming armed not all that long ago. We are, I think, as an organisation, acutely aware of what that means. It means that we are quite conscious that we expose officers to stressful environments and we expect them to cope with them. There is no stigma attached to the fact that we are doing that. If you talk to any of our executive, they are quite open about the fact that we are in the business of exposing officers to dangerous and stressful jobs. We just have to have mechanisms in place to support our officers through that and afterwards.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: That was excellent. For me, is there anything you think we could take away as part of our inquiry just in closing?

Dr Evans: Just to close and to come back to the question of why we might have been asked to talk to you today, one of the things that we do as an organisation—we get ministerial permission to do it—in times of disaster is that we deploy our operational resources to assist our staff. For example, in the time of the Queensland floods—Customs and Border Protection maintains a fleet of four-wheel drive vehicles for its remote area operations. We have officers who are trained to drive those vehicles under a range of difficult circumstances. We deployed those to physically go out and check on our officers in Brisbane in flood-affected areas to make sure they were okay. We were given permission to deploy our operational resources, such as generators, into private people's homes. So, that is —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Where can I apply!

Dr Evans: We are a lead agency in that regard. Best practice in that regard in that our minister and our chief executive are willing to give permission for operational resources to be deployed to assist our officers in times of disaster. In terms of the Brisbane floods, that worked quite well. My position in the regional director's office in Queensland had a direct line through to our CEO under those circumstances.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Was that initiated by you?

Dr Evans: I was not in the office at that time, but our office initiated it.

Ms Pollock: Yes, it was by the senior managers in the office at the time. Luckily we do have, obviously, our enforcement section, who are our experts in that. We supported them. We contacted all staff. We went through our staff list, making sure we knew where everybody was and if anyone needed any assistance. Again, I think it is part of that Customs family, supporting each other and just making sure everyone was all right.

Dr Evans: And our executive are flexible. They understand it. They are willing to, essentially, burn a bit of the agency's budget in deploying vehicles in a role for which you would not ordinarily deploy them. From my point of view, that worked very well.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Keep up the good work.

Dr Evans: We do our best.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you, again, for meeting with the committee. We do very much appreciate the efforts that you have made to provide us with the information to assist us with our inquiry. We will also send you out a draft of the transcript to make any changes if required.

Dr Evans: I thank the committee for your time.

Hearing concluded at 2.27 pm