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 PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 23 MAY 2012

SESSION TWO

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 10.43 am

MURPHY, MR TERRY
Director General, Department for Child Protection,
189 Royal Street,
East Perth 6004, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks for coming in this morning, Terry. This committee hearing is a proceeding of the Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee this morning?

Mr Murphy: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Can we just ask you a fairly broad question? Have you any opening statements that you would like to make?

Mr Murphy: No. I have made a very brief submission and I think that captures the core facts about how we manage trauma in relation to natural disasters. So, obviously we will touch on that but I will not repeat that.

The CHAIRMAN: Terry, can you just outline for us the work that basically staff undertake during natural disasters and your involvement with other state agencies?

Mr Murphy: Under the state Emergency Management Act we are the nominated agency to deal with the welfare response. Essentially that means, at the time of a disaster, opening and staffing evacuation centres, providing financial assistance, material assistance—blankets, food and the like—personal support to victims as well as the accommodation in the evacuation centre. That welfare response then continues beyond the immediate crisis of the disaster to the extent necessary or dictated by the crisis. For example, in relation to the Northam fires, we are only just now winding down, essentially, a community welfare officer, a community development support function. For the Margaret River fires we still have a community welfare officer working, and after the Armadale fires we only wound down that subsequent community welfare function about six months ago. That continuing function looks after financial assistance that continues. For major grants, although our office may be directly involved in that too, that is where people can receive a fair amount of money, $10 000, for re-establishment of basic white goods, furniture, accommodation expenses and the like. Continuing accommodation needs we coordinate. The Lake Clifton fires were probably one of the best examples where a lot of people came forward offering houses and accommodation, and that was coordinated, allocating people to those houses, through us. But also that continuing welfare support really looks out for those people in the community who are suffering ongoing trauma or

struggling post the event. So it is a bit like the welfare officer: we almost carry a caseload of people that he or she visits to see them through the time as well as providing continuing practical assistance.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: One of the issues in the work that your officers do, and I think you have alluded to this, is that it is prolonged; it is not just sort of in and out like some of the other front-line personnel. So they are having to almost day-to-day go through the trauma with victims. In somewhere like Warmun, for example, where I understand the response was good, you are probably having to relocate your staff from a larger centre so that they are away from home for a while; they are dealing with victims continually. What measures do you put in for their wellbeing in those sorts of circumstances?

Mr Murphy: Warmun is actually a really good example. That is probably the biggest effort over the last 12 months and it really illustrates how we are structured. We have both dedicated district emergency services officers covering local districts and an emergency response team, which is a pool now of about 60 staff who are on call on a rotating basis. And for Warmun, for example, we were rotating a lot of people through, both for the people in Kununurra and when they returned to Warmun. We think we are pretty good at looking after our staff. It is a dual-edged sword, but we have the advantage of being in the welfare business, so we have processes of supervision and debriefing built into how we operate. Additionally, I think there is probably a heightened awareness and readiness to use employee assistance programs, and certainly they do get used quite a lot. A really good example of that, I think, was when we actually deployed staff to Queensland in the Queensland floods as well to help that state out. Essentially, people had a hotline access to the employees assistance program. But essentially, Margaret, to boil it down, it is the supervision people get on the spot, which is part supportive, part directional; a deliberate debriefing and then use of the employee assistance program.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What about taking off a shift at eight hours or whatever; you are pretty structured and know people on shift or whatever?

Mr Murphy: Yes, we are but sometimes it gets stretched—it really does. I am thinking of the Carnarvon floods where although we did bring rotating people through, the impact on an office of eight people was enormous, because there is not only the evacuation centre, the continuing welfare role that I spelt out, but there is an impact on the office, because when the crisis hits, it is all hands on deck and all the efforts go into the emergency centre.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: That was my next question. So, what happens to their day-to-day work that they do the rest of the time?

Mr Murphy: That banks up. In both Carnarvon and Kununurra though, when Warmun emergencies were on, we used back-up staff on a voluntary basis to go and man the front-line and make sure that the work did not bank up too much. So, we are a large enough organisation that we can do that, but of course anywhere in the system if you pull from somewhere and it does create strain. But we are large enough that the emergency response team, with 60 volunteers and then other ad hoc measures, to buttress the front-line; we manage.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: We have had a few challenges in terms of disaster management over the last few years and from each one we learnt lessons. What are the sorts of lessons that you have learnt in the operation of your agency in this context?

Mr Murphy: That is really interesting. Every disaster goes through a form of debriefing and reporting process and there are always lessons learnt there. In the debriefings I have been involved in with staff personally—in Carnarvon particularly and I am thinking and some others—it strikes me in every one that there are always procedures we could do better. But we have also got to be a bit forgiving and understanding and assure staff that all this happens in crisis mode, so there are going to be mistakes; it is never going to be perfectly smooth and that every system works and there

will be no tension and slippages. I think one of the larger lessons for individual events is to have some self-correction built in; essentially back-up through the supervisory processes so that if things do muck up, such as the electronic cards do not work to give people financial assistance, we can grab the paper book and make that work. So I think we have got a bit better at that and a bit more forgiving of ourselves for the issues, the mistakes that do occur.

Two other big changes have resulted, one directly from the amount of disasters that we have incurred and one indirectly, and it is for other purposes as well. Previously our emergency response team, the pool of volunteers, comprised about 20 people and they were on call too often, and if there were disasters in succession, they were used too much. So we have actually broadened that pool out to 60 people, and we have very deliberately targeted people in non-service delivery roles. We have got some excellent people from corporate services and so on who can provide that back-up and who have got enough acuity to the issues to do it.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What was it about those 20 people, what manifestations of it made you realise that was too small a pool?

Mr Murphy: They were used too often; they were too much of a drain from the districts from which they came; there was too much work left behind; and they got worn out, they got too tired, particularly with Warmun and Carnarvon.

The CHAIRMAN: You have spoken mostly about the services you deliver to the general public. What about to your staff? How do you prepare your staff for getting to those incidents and how do you cope with your staff? What happens with your staff when they actually have issues following those, because they will see a lot of disaster, of trauma? How are they dealt with, how are they coped with?

Mr Murphy: Our preparation is pretty good, we think. Our training—essentially around occupational health and safety, also preparation for trauma, dealing with trauma—is good. Then in situ we keep our regular supervision processes in place so that no staff member is just left out there to do their job and then go home. There is regular supervision with the senior person in situ. Debriefing is the next challenge. Certainly there is a form of debriefing after the event, as quick as possible after the event, but we have also got to be opportunistic about how we can help people debrief after shifts and the like once their shifts are over. So, they are the in situ ones. Then, as I indicated, we make good use of our emergency assistance program. If somebody really does get tossed around by what is occurring, the employee assistance program is on tap for them by phone or in person. The Queensland floods were a really good example because we could not just give people eight-hour shifts. They were pretty organised in Queensland, but it was such a big event that there were also bits where it was not well organised, and people were actually doing 12-hour shifts and then they were sleeping in the evacuation centres, some of them, because there simply was not enough motel accommodation otherwise. So they had a 24-hour hotline to the employee assistance program, and very few of them used it. I think all were reassured by having it and some did use it. The other one I would point out there, because Queensland is a really good example and it does indicate our level of supervision, is we will pull people out if they are not coping. If it is obvious that their emotional capacity to cope is being affected to the extent that it is hurting them or hurting the job, we will pull them out.

The CHAIRMAN: How do you support their families? If you have deployed 20 people to Queensland, and they are there for three or four weeks, how are their families supported while their loved ones are away?

Mr Murphy: That is less so, but the employee assistance program is open to them as well. Any members of family can use that program. When we had staff at Warmun and in the Queensland floods, though, we were attentive to that for supervision. We were quite conscious of it and made sure people had access to personal computers for Skype. We sent a bunch of them up with them—

more difficult in Warmun than in Queensland, but the Queensland people use that a lot. The Warmun deployments were not as long as the Queensland deployment.

The CHAIRMAN: You obviously train for disasters and train for the events. How do you decide what is the worst event you train for?

Mr Murphy: In many ways we are not as in control of that as Emergency Services WA and FESA and police are. Essentially, they determine the airport disaster scenario or the terrorist scenario and we participate in those exercises with them. That all occurs through our emergency services unit, which is a dedicated unit for this purpose. The idea is that these learnings cascade through the establishment, essentially, to the emergency services, unit; the district emergency services offices and then the emergency response team.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You have talked about keeping an eye on staff during the currency of a disaster, but as you would be well aware a bit of incident stress sometimes comes up six months or two years or whatever later. Other than the employee assistance program, what monitoring is done within the department?

[11.00 am]

Mr Murphy: It is not deliberately associated with the possibility of post-traumatic stress, but it is our supervision systems. This is where we have real strength over and above fire and police, frankly. Because we are a social work department, supervision is built into how we do our work. That supervision has a few functions: learning, management and workload management, but the learning part encompasses people's emotional wellbeing because our work is emotional. I am really confident that our supervision processes pick that up with our service delivery staff. Where I am less confident is that we are using more administrative staff for these purposes. That said, though, we are there in part with an emergency response team and there are regular training events for those staff and opportunities to get together and our emergency services manager is a social worker, so, really, it is his responsibility. He is very good at it because we talk about it in our supervision, because I supervise him—that we make sure the people on the emergency response team are emotionally robust. If they are not, we will pull them out of their work and make sure they get the support they need.

The CHAIRMAN: Terry, you mentioned debriefing a number of times, but there is a bit of a debate going on around the world at the moment about debriefing and psychological first aid. Have you entered into that debate; are you up to speed with what is happening?

Mr Murphy: I think that debate has absolutely struck a chord with me. I have already had those conversations with our emergency people and our district psychologists. I have not mentioned that we do have psychologists. As part of the whole emergency response team, there is always a psychologist as part of each group. She usually keeps an extra eye out on our teams. The psychologists in our department get this. Essentially, the debate boils down to, as I understand it, debriefing is not always indicated. It is not for everyone because, for some people, it just means re-experiencing and exacerbating the trauma. It is a really fine line. Halden and I were just talking about the walls before and how bottling up does not work and you have to keep your eye out for that but it is not necessary or best for everyone, certainly in the same way. For some people it may be simply some reassurance and a safety net and a kind word, whereas others really need to get it out. It means it is more sophisticated than it was and it is a more skilled job than it was. We are fortunate as an agency, I think, because we have a group of psychologists, a large group, 60-odd, and we can afford to have them attached to the emergency response teams and to districts—the East Kimberley with the Warmun disaster; the Murchison with the Carnarvon floods. The local psychologist can play a strong role there.

The CHAIRMAN: We have talked primarily about major disasters, but post-traumatic incident stress comes from continually showing up at the same issues. Your child support workers who go

out see many things that are quite disturbing. That must play on them. What training is in place for those people and what is there after an event? Who keeps an eye on them over their career to see what is building up?

Mr Murphy: This is why I wanted to do this committee appearance myself rather than just our emergency experiences of disaster response. People do get hit by the trauma but, by and large, our service delivery staff experience it as very positive work because they are helping people in a very straightforward way. Everyone is really grateful. They get accolades from the local government and all the partners and so on and it is very personally rewarding for them and for the organisation, by and large. On the other hand, our day-to-day work, particularly in child protection but also dealing with difficult families in family support, carries more serious, vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is part and parcel of doing child protection work. You see horrible, ugly things that happen to children and you are dealing with parents with whom you have to form a working relationship to be effective and you have to work with respect and compassion when your natural human reaction might be exactly the opposite. It is a very tough gig, psychologically. Once again, it is the same processes. It boils down to very good learning, orientation training learning and good supervision that has a real emotional care component to it. That is because in our work you work with your humanity. The social work association has as one of their awards, which we sponsor, "Head, Heart and Hands"; and you work with your thinking, your doing and your emotions, which are such a big part of it. Our supervision has to be attentive to the emotional wellbeing of staff. There are a number of safety mechanisms built into our child protection workers. You will see this in our values and in our case practice. Decisions are made by teams. There are serious checks and balances in our decision making, so that, particularly junior people, do not carry very momentous decisions on their own. They simply cannot. It would be wrong for a range of reasons.

It might help too if I tell you what I tell all our new staff when they graduate their orientation training and are able to carry cases for the first time. It is incredibly important for the health of our organisation because the organisational climate is a very serious issue in child protection. Child protection systems around the world are bedevilled by, "A child died, who do we blame?" They are hung out to dry in the press, wherever, and that is just corrosive for our staff, so we work really hard against that. The minister and I both talk a lot about this but I tell new staff two things: "Never carry anxiety alone; always share your anxieties. It will not take them away but it halves them. Never go home on a Friday night wondering, by yourself, what's happening to that child. Share that anxiety." That is in situ. We have those mechanisms well established. The other one is: When a tragedy occurs, if you have done your best and you are open about what has happened, the reality is that we are living in an imperfect world; we deal with uncertainty all the time. Tragedies do occur in our business. If one occurs on your watch and, as I say, "You've done your best; you're open and honest," your bosses will be lined up behind you, including me in front of the TV cameras. Those are really important reassurances for our staff. They have been tested on the odd occasion, some of you might have noticed. When tragedies occur, it has to be the boss's role to take the heat—it has to be. I do not want to lay that on but it is really, really important because this is where child protection systems, as I say, have a corrosive effect if there is a scapegoating or blaming of people who have, by and large, done their best and are operating in an imperfect world with behaviour they cannot totally control.

The CHAIRMAN: You have also mentioned the employee assistance program. Can you give us a background of what that looks like for child protection?

Mr Murphy: It is the same program as for most employers. Essentially, it is 24/7 access to counsellors who are at arm's length to the organisation. We use Prime; they are pretty good. Counselling, though, is as good as the individual. Different organisations have different individuals who are better or worse at any given time. We reviewed our EAP about 18 months ago, I think, and I think you would say it came up as okay. I would not give it an A-plus, but I certainly would not give it a C-minus either. It very much depends on who you get. We are certainly confident in it. It is

an essential safety net—24/7 availability is really important—but EAP is a safety net to our own internal processes—supervision, and, if needs be, we will bring our own psychologist to bear with our own staff.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there support for families as well or is it just for the employees?

Mr Murphy: No; and I think that is an area where we are not strong. EAP, once again, is available to families, and that is known and important. But it is the case, I think—it is probably a bit more pronounced in non-social work agencies—our staff can carry their work home more than an accountant, for argument's sake, and that can mean extra strains on families. Our balance, though, is that our people know that that is the nature of their work—it is all part of their vocation.

The CHAIRMAN: It seems from what you are saying, Terry, because across the department there are similar pressure to the ones that you would experience if you were having to address issues in a natural disaster—that really you do not deal with personnel who are involved in natural disaster relief any differently from how you deal with all of your frontline staff?

Mr Murphy: That is right. We bring the same systems we have for doing traumatic work per se to bear in a natural disaster.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What is the level of attrition in your department in terms of frontline staff?

Mr Murphy: It is certainly good compared to nationally. We have around 12 per cent turnover.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Do you conduct exit interviews?

Mr Murphy: Yes, wherever we can, and we do not pick up in those exit interviews that people are feeling burnt out or unsupported; and that is what we are looking for.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So if someone is on sick leave for two weeks, or whatever, and the doctor said it is stress or something, would that be followed up by a supervisor in the way you have explained?

Mr Murphy: It is. We try and work that very hard. I think, though, we have got to get better at that. I think we have got to better at workers' compensation and return to work and so on. I think the workers' comp system is not ideal and in fact some of it drives the propensity away from coming back to work. I am only thinking of one area of our work, which is residential care, where people are assaulted regularly—well, not regularly. In fact, I will take the opportunity to tell you that the number of critical incidents in residential care since we transformed the service from big hostels to four-bedroom homes has really dropped phenomenally. But these are our most difficult kids, often aggressive, often mentally ill; and, if they are not aggressive, they may be doing things like soiling themselves regularly, as a behaviour born of a mental health issue. So our residential care workers really are the area where it is toughest, and where traditionally the support systems have been the weakest. So we have actually spent a lot of time building up those support systems—a four-bedroom house, a psychologist or half a psychologist for each house, supervision for all staff, once again bringing in the same system. But that is where I do think we have to get better—when somebody is either traumatised or sick of it. It is the next thing that we want to do, if you like—get better at those workers' compensation cases.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: In terms of mental health first aid training, obviously if you have got turnover of staff, more of those would maybe be falling through the cracks there; would you say that is part of the induction process?

[11.15 am]

Mr Murphy: No, that is part of our initial induction. It is for all staff, but particularly psychologists and team leaders are critical there.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any peer support within the department?

Mr Murphy: There is an enormous amount of peer support—well, there is some formal peer support, but mostly it is informal, except for Aboriginal staff, where we do have more formalised

peer support and we do have mentoring for each Aboriginal staff member who is employed, because they do it a bit tougher. They will always tell you that even when they knock off at five o'clock and they go home or they are in the supermarket and so on, people continually remind them that they work in welfare. So there we have more formalised peer support. But I do think it is our strength, and it has ever been thus, but I would like to think it has built up better over the years as our capacity has built over the last five years. Staff really do look after each other. When the department was going through a rocky period that was less good—pre the Ford review—but it is our natural strength, being a social welfare agency, that people do look out for each other and we have a very supportive environment. It has to be led, though. It really has to come from leadership through our organisation, and particularly local leadership, so district director, team leaders, local psychologist; and in residential care, the same—the directors, the house manager, the house psychologist, and there it is tougher because these people do not have the same level of professional qualifications.

The CHAIRMAN: I have just been reminded: do you track people who attend major incidents afterwards to see how they are going, and also if they leave the organisation? We have heard evidence, both here and overseas, that after a major incident, there is a higher attrition rate because people just cannot cope? Do you track people?

Mr Murphy: We do not track them after they have left the organisation. We do the exit interviews for anyone who leaves, wherever we can, and keep our eyes out for those tell-tale signs: if they say they are burnt out, there is too much work to do, the organisation is a muddle and they did not know what to do or did not get good support. They are the things we look out for, and they do not come up. In terms of major events and the deployments, getting together our emergency response teams—the group of volunteers, the volunteer on-call people who are rostered on—bringing them together, is how we monitor those. Plus, because they are spread throughout the organisation, directors who have volunteers in their teams are asked to keep an eye on their emotional robustness, and if they are not sufficiently emotionally robust, then that feeds through to the district emergency unit, and we will deal with that supportively and by removing them.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: That just reminds me, because you have mentioned volunteers, that I think the Auditor General brought out a report in February this year relating to how government agencies interact with volunteers. Is your agency doing any follow-up in relation to the recommendations of the Auditor General?

Mr Murphy: We work with organisations like the Salvation Army, Red Cross, and sometimes even CWA—the CWA in Carnarvon is great—for evacuation centre support. So we really leave the management of those people to their organisations, whereas we will work with the organisations on the state welfare committee, and we will certainly check out with them how they are travelling. But we do leave Red Cross, Salvos, CWA and the like to look after their own.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned Warmun a few times earlier on. Is that incident still current? Have people been returned to their homes?

Mr Murphy: Pretty much. Just about everybody is back now. The really unfortunate thing that happens, though, is that there is a drop-off of the population, because people get sucked into being in Kununurra, into a regional centre, and do not go back as quickly as they would have otherwise because of the time they have spent there. But most people are back and the rest will get back, we think. We have still got some dedicated welfare support there, though.

The CHAIRMAN: Part of the trauma there was the fact they were off their lands and away from their town. So you still have people dealing with those issues up there?

Mr Murphy: Yes. We have got permanent staff at Warmun at any rate, but we also employ—essentially there was a manager for the emergency and a deputy, in addition to our child protection

staff. So they are in addition to the Warmun establishment and they are still there and seeing the disaster through.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks for your evidence before the committee this morning. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Can you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period, we will deem it to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, can you please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thanks again for coming in today.

Mr Murphy: Thank you. We appreciate the opportunity.

Hearing concluded at 11.21 am