

**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
MONDAY, 18 JUNE 2012**

SESSION ONE

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 10.04 am

WINGATE, MR RONALD EDWARD
Chaplain, Fire and Emergency Services Authority,
PO Box P1174,
Perth 6844, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Before I start, there is an opening statement I will read. There are a couple of questions in it, and I ask that you answer them verbally rather than with a nod or shake so we can record them on *Hansard*. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect as proceedings in the house demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Have you completed a “Details of Witness” form?

Mr Wingate: Yes, I have.

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

Mr Wingate: Yes.

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

Mr Wingate: Yes, I did.

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

Mr Wingate: Not really, no.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you any opening statement that you would like to make or are you happy for us to get into throwing questions at you?

Mr Wingate: No, not really.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give us a bit of an outline or the background of the work that you undertake during normal work times, and specifically during disasters?

Mr Wingate: My role as chaplain to FESA is a many and varied role. I attend a lot of incidents and all fatalities that happen in the metropolitan area that FESA attends. In natural disasters, I tend mainly to focus on and look after our staff, but sometimes in the process of doing that it means looking after the public because that then takes stress off our firefighters’ worrying about the general public. For me the most part really is not necessarily in natural disasters. Certainly they happen, but not as many in the course of the year as what happens on a daily basis with firefighters. On a daily basis we have people being trapped in motor cars, house fires and those sorts of things, so it is not just the natural disaster stuff; it is pretty regular. On top of those sorts of duties I have the natural things that you would have as a chaplain; it might be conducting weddings, funerals, christenings of their families and those sorts of things as well, and visiting sick or injured firefighters in hospital or at home or who may be suffering some sort of stress in the process of their work.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, I must apologise as I neglected to introduce people on the committee so you know who you are talking to. Albert Jacob on my immediate left is the member for Ocean Reef and deputy chair of the committee; Margaret Quirk is the member for Girrawheen, a committee member; Ian Britza is the member for Morley, a committee member; and my name is Tony O’Gorman; chair of the committee and the member for Joondalup. You know David Worth, I think,

and Jovita Hogan is our research officer. I apologise for not doing that right at the start. I thank you for your first answer.

Ron, do you receive any special training about worker stress and trauma?

Mr Wingate: Yes, I have done a number of training events with—they changed their name, it used to be the Critical Incident Stress Management Foundation of Australia—it is now called CIMA, the Crisis Intervention and Management Australasia. They are an Australia-wide organisation that deals in critical incident stress management. I have done mental health first aid—those sorts of things.

The CHAIRMAN: We were just going to mention that. Can you tell us what you look for in a mental health or psychological first aid approach?

Mr Wingate: The main thing I look for is whether our firefighters are behaving in a manner that is not normal for them. We often say if it is not normal for their normal behaviour, then it is an indication there might be something wrong. That is the first thing we would look for. That requires, of course, getting to know them. Of course, when you look at 30 000 people across FESA, knowing all of them is pretty difficult. But certainly with the career firefighters—which is where the bulk of our work comes—the traumatic stuff; they are handling it on a daily basis.

The CHAIRMAN: Do they do a debrief after every incident and do you attend some of those?

Mr Wingate: Not after every incident. If it is a fatality, I am notified immediately from our comm centre, wherever it might happen in the state. Depending where it is in the state, I will either ring the station when they get back on station or if it is in the metropolitan area within a reasonable distance, I will attend the incident. I will have a chat—I suppose you could call it a debriefing—with the crew after, and advise them and make sure they are aware of what is available. Then there would be a follow-up, probably within the next week or so anyhow from either myself or one of the welfare team.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Last night there was a fatality in Nollamara. Have you had an opportunity to talk to the team or you will do that?

Mr Wingate: I attended that scene last night. I spent the time with them until they left. I spoke to them all at the end of the job, and yes I will do further follow-up in the next week or so.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it just you or is there a whole welfare team?

Mr Wingate: The welfare team consists of me as chaplain. We have a welfare coordinator, Anneliese Smith; she is a registered psychologist, and we have two welfare officers who are both career firefighters. Four people is not a terribly big unit.

The CHAIRMAN: And, as you say, there are 30 000 volunteers and professionals.

Mr Wingate: Recognising that a lot of them are volunteers, I suppose you could say that it is not that they are there on a regular basis, but that in some ways makes it more difficult because they are not on station all day every day like the career people. For volunteers, very often they are in the country areas, so when they go to a bad traffic accident there is a good possibility they will know the person who is injured or deceased, and that adds another dimension again.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you treat volunteers any differently from the career people?

Mr Wingate: No. Depending on their location, if they are up in Karratha, the first response would be to give them a phone call and talk to perhaps their captain or their manager up there. If they indicate that everybody is okay, again, the reminder that there are EAP programs, the welfare team and, if need be, and if they say they have some people who are not travelling terribly well, then there would be a trip to Karratha to follow them up.

The CHAIRMAN: How bad is the incident you plan for? I was going to say “rehearse”, but how do you plan for the worst you will see? How do you determine what is the worst disaster you might come to and how bad the people are you might have to treat?

Mr Wingate: It is hard to decide what is the worst incident, because it can vary. Sometimes something very minor can be a trigger for our firefighters if they have had an accumulation of a number of incidents. I have had many a firefighter ring me up and say, “We had a job last night. It wasn’t anything terribly particular, but I am not travelling well as a result of it.” When you sit down and talk to them, you find they have a whole range of other incidents they have been to that they have not really dealt with well, so they have this accumulation building on them. It is a matter of dealing with that. It is hard to know what is the worst incident. We do talk about things, and anything involving children is always very difficult for them, or involving somebody who they may know, or something that triggers something in their own personal life. Those things can make a difference too.

The CHAIRMAN: What about peer support? Does FESA run a peer support program? We have been told that they used to, but that it has fallen away.

Mr Wingate: Yes, it has fallen away. We did have reasonable-size peer support unit, and probably one of the best. What has happened is that some years ago—let me give you a little bit of the history of where FESA’s welfare is. Some years ago there was me and one peer support coordinator as the welfare team. The peer support coordinator back then went back to his duties as a firefighter and for nearly two years there was purely myself. Obviously during that period there was no way I could continue to do the training and so on for the peer support program—that was not my role anyhow—so it did lose its impact. After that our welfare coordinator was employed. When she came in there was a lot of other more important things or more immediate things that needed to be addressed to deal with where people were. By then the peer support program had died away quite substantially, and for her to pick that up on day one and get it running again has been very difficult. She has had an enormous amount of work to develop, and I think she has done very, very well in doing just that.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think there is value in peer support?

Mr Wingate: I think there is. I think sometimes people may get out of their role. They are so keen to help that they like to think of themselves as counsellors and professionals. The peer support role really is to deal with the first aid, if you like, the first impact, the first opportunity to meet with their peers and encourage them to get better and greater support. I think there is a role for it, and I know within FESA there is an intention to pick that up again and get it going now.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that not the important bit, where you have the proper training and some resources dedicated to making sure that works, rather than having it ad hoc?

Mr Wingate: Yes, definitely; the training needs to be picked up. That has not happened over the past few years; the training has not been run.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Ron, I would have thought that the peer support would have been a natural occurrence, notwithstanding that some are not professional in dealing with stuff, but I just thought that would have been something that would have occurred between mateship and between friendships without it having to be too official.

Mr Wingate: It does very much. That is why Anneliese, our welfare coordinator, has tended to put a lot of focus into giving more information to more people so that, if you like, everybody becomes a peer supporter so they can support one another, rather than have a few individuals because, if you have got a problem, you are not necessarily going to talk to this person, but you might be happier talking to this person. One of the failings I think that we had with our program some time back was that we introduced one individual phone number so that if anybody needed some help, they rang that one 1800 number and there would be about four or five people who used to handle that phone. Now, if you are in a bad way, you are not going to ring on a phone when you are not sure who is going to be there. I think we need to go back to what we had initially, which was a list of the peer supporters, their phone numbers, and you could go down the list and say, “I would not talk to him, him or him but I would talk to him.”

Mr I.M. BRITZA: It saddens me that the peer support has gone down, and the reason being that I have found personally that many people on the front-line, if they made an official call, somehow they felt that would be put on a report and therefore they would not talk or really share their issue, whereas the peer support thing was very much off the record; it was very much over a drink or whatever. It at least went that way before it got too serious.

Mr Wingate: I agree. That is where we do find that a lot of people will talk to various people on station who they know and are comfortable with and they are the people we really want to get back into that peer support program who people will go to. But you are right; it is the first stop. Interestingly, we recently have done a survey through FESA and I think 28 per cent of people surveyed said that their first preference would be to contact the chaplain. I think it was 30 per cent—do not quote me on that—who said that their first choice would be to speak to a friend within the service.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: What was that first percentage about the chaplain?

Mr Wingate: Twenty-eight per cent would prefer to speak to the chaplain as their first choice and 30 per cent for a friend within the service.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: That is pretty encouraging. That is higher than I thought it would have been.

Mr Wingate: It is. It is quite surprising. It does come about by creating relationships with people.

The CHAIRMAN: While we are on the topic of peer support, in the US, we were told that retired officers were the primary source of peer support and they came back on scene at 9/11 and post Hurricane Katrina. Are there any retired officers who do peer support or work with the welfare, or is it advisable?

Mr Wingate: Not within peer support. There are a few who have an interest that way and they probably work with those retired firefighters more than with the career—with the people who are currently in the field. They do tend to work more with the retired firefighters.

The CHAIRMAN: If the welfare part of the agency—it is relatively small—had a major disaster, how would you cope with that if it was a long-term thing over a number of days? You can only put in so many hours before you need a break.

Mr Wingate: Exactly, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: So how would it work if it was a full-on issue?

Mr Wingate: With some difficulty. I am part of the Salvation Army and so things like Margaret River, I was able to get the Salvation Army to send a couple of other officers up there and do some work there. Also, within the state, most of that sort of thing for the public is dealt with by the Department for Child Protection. Our role then becomes to make sure that our firefighters are okay.

The CHAIRMAN: How long would you stay at a scene at one time if it was a prolonged issue?

Mr Wingate: It depends on the scene. Roleystone I spent far too many hours at.

The CHAIRMAN: Who looks after you? Who is the one that taps you on the shoulder and says, “Ron you need to go because you have been here for 12 or 16 hours”?

Mr Wingate: That would come down to Anneliese, the coordinator; she is aware of what I am doing as a rule. The role probably needs to be increased. If you look at our numbers as opposed to police numbers, police have about 9 000 within the service. They have two chaplains; I think it is three psychologists and a welfare team. We have one chaplain for 30 000, one psychologist. It is considerably —

The CHAIRMAN: How do you actually take yourself out of situations and clear your mind, because you are dealing with everybody’s trauma and how everybody is reacting to that?

Mr Wingate: I use the same sort of systems that we are suggesting for firefighters. I have access to the EAP if I need it, but I also have a big network within the Salvation Army that I can go to and people there who I can talk to.

The CHAIRMAN: The Salvos is a religious group. Do you find that fireys from different religious backgrounds cope differently with the situations they are faced with?

Mr Wingate: I think those who have a spiritual or religious background of some sort certainly cope better than those who clearly declare that they do not have, although I think most people have some sort of belief.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Obviously, part of your work extends to the families of firefighters. We have also come across situations where those at the front-line have also been victims. For example, they might have had their house burnt down. Are there any sorts of special issues in terms of burns to the families and where you have a situation where they are both front-line and victim at the same time?

Mr Wingate: Yes, we have. I think it was two in Roleystone that were exactly that and needed a reasonable amount of support to help them as best we possibly could to make sure they were able to pick themselves up and move on again.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What was the nature of that support?

Mr Wingate: I guess taking time with them to talk them through and say, “Okay, where are they going to go now?” We help them to understand that they need to contact their insurance agency and look at where they are going to stay and the practical things that are going to impact on them straight away.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I think, Ron, you mentioned earlier in your evidence the accumulative effect; sometimes you come across a seemingly benign incident and it affects an officer adversely and that may well be because they have not dealt with previous incidents. How common is that?

Mr Wingate: Reasonably common. Anneliese has developed a program that we call a wellness program and we are trying to deliver that. That is a bit of peer support training, I guess, for everybody. We are trying to deliver that to encourage them to acknowledge that they have a need to look after themselves and deal with it in the first instance rather than later.

I think we have come a long way over the years. The culture of firefighters is that they are the heroes and can cope with anything, so they do not like to admit that sometimes it is getting them down. But gradually we are breaking that culture and they do that as they start to get comfortable with you and they start to understand what mental illness and difficulties are.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: There is a bit of paradox with firefighters because, as I understand it—you have had a lot longer experience with them, obviously—they are quite conscious of their physical health and keeping fit, but they may be a little unwilling in terms of the psychological wellness.

Mr Wingate: That is part of what we are teaching in this wellness program. We tell them, “You take a lot of effort to stay healthy and well physically. What is the difference between that and a mental injury? You need to do the same sort of thing there and keep yourself right and well.” As we are putting that out, we are getting a lot of positive responses from firefighters. Of course, across the whole spectrum of things, it is going to take time. I think you have in the FESA report something about how that has been delivered to a number of country stations. The intention is to get it through a lot more of those throughout this year. We have just about completed doing it for all career firefighters now.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, are any of the fireys ringing you or the welfare area suggesting that one of their colleagues may be needing attention?

Mr Wingate: Very often I get phone calls from somebody saying, “Don’t tell him I rang you, but he is not travelling well. He is grumpy at work or he is just not himself.”

The CHAIRMAN: How do you explain to that person —

Mr Wingate: I ring them up and go and see them and ask how things are going and they will say, “Oh yeah, I am fine.” I will tell them that is not what I am hearing and they will ask, “What are you hearing?” Nine times out of 10 they are quite comfortable. They understand that someone has rung and I am not going to tell them who that somebody is, and so they just accept that.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you suggest that they be taken off service because of —

Mr Wingate: I can do. It would probably result in a workers’ comp claim—suggesting that they put in a workers’ comp, go and see their doctor and get booked off.

The CHAIRMAN: Talking about that, are there any particular barriers to the fireys receiving assistance? Is there a culture within the fireys that you do not report it because it is not macho enough?

[10.30 am]

Mr Wingate: Certainly there is. As I was saying earlier, there is that culture of they are tough and they do not need it; there is that barrier. There is a little bit of—what would you say?—mistrust, I think, from years gone by in the organisation. When the organisation changed from WA Fire Brigades’ Board to FESA, they very much felt that they were losing their identity and there became a “them and us” mentality. I think that has been addressed to some degree in recent days; they certainly seem a lot more comfortable now than they were. Gradually, that barrier is breaking down, but, yes, you do hear firefighters say, “I wouldn’t trust FESA; they’ll stitch us up.” I think part of that is just that when FESA was born, there was not a good presentation of that to sell it well so they felt comfortable with it. But, as I say, it has changed in the last few months.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, do you interact with chaplains from say the police or other organisations? Is there some sort a network there?

Mr Wingate: Yes. We often ring one another up, have a chat and talk about what is going on.

The CHAIRMAN: So, is that the support for the chaplains themselves?

Mr Wingate: Yes; it works.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, we are told that some of that research shows that about 20 per cent staff suffer, or may suffer, long-term effects from trauma following disasters and need ongoing assistance. Is that way off the mark for FESA or would that be about right?

Mr Wingate: Off the top of my head I would say that that would be pretty close. I do not have the statistics, as I say, but I think that would be pretty close, realising that these guys are dealing with these things, as I said earlier, on a daily basis. They never know from one minute to the next what is going to happen and that in itself can be a stress. You know, you are doing normal duties on the station or your training or whatever it might be, out checking hydrants or whatever, and you never know when that call is going to come and five minutes from now you are going to be trying to cut somebody out of a motor car. So there is that constant stress there all the time, but we think that that would be pretty close.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any idea how many staff from FESA take medical retirement each year due to stress or trauma?

Mr Wingate: No, I do not have that figure.

The CHAIRMAN: But there would be some?

Mr Wingate: There are certainly some, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And they go off on workers’ comp and then —

Mr Wingate: They go off on workers’ comp and then through medical advice and those sorts of things, it is decided that they are no longer capable of coming back to front-line service. Some are

able to come back to other lighter duties; some come back to full duties, but there are always—we have a number at present—who we seriously believe will not come back to front-line duties or back to fire service.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What sort of numbers are they—just a ballpark figure?

Mr Wingate: I would say that at the present moment there are three or four.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, what is the most traumatic event you have attended through FESA? Do not describe it to us; just give us a bit of background.

Mr Wingate: The most dramatic ones involved children. Some of those horrific ones are people who suicide in front of trains—those kinds of things. But children are particularly hard.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned earlier the former staff of FESA. Do you ever have to get involved with the former staff?

Mr Wingate: Yes; they have a retired firefighters group that meet. They have regular meetings and, when I can, I go along to those meetings and get in amongst them and spend a bit of time with them—good blokes.

The CHAIRMAN: You are watching them long after they have left?

Mr Wingate: Yes, certainly.

The CHAIRMAN: Other questions, members?

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Just to say you do an excellent job from all feedback, and it is a tough one.

Mr Wingate: We certainly try. I was going to say that it is not hard to do, because firefighters are incredible people. They really are caring people, I guess; that is why they are there, and that is why it hurts. They care about their people in their community and that is why they are doing it, to try to help them and save them, and that is why it has an impact when something goes wrong or people are badly injured. One of the things I was going to say is that, while we do have a good set up when somebody actually dies at an incident, we do not have quite as good a follow-up with when they go to incidents where people do not die, and sometimes they are far more traumatic than the ones where they do. Sometimes the welfare department do not even know that they have been to them, because there is no recording system—no system to notify us that they are at a particularly nasty job.

The CHAIRMAN: So should all incidents be notified for welfare or is that just for a very small workforce —

Mr Wingate: No; I think there probably needs to be some way of identifying things and probably leave it up to the crew that actually attend, whereby if it is particularly nasty, then they call it in. The way the system works with fatalities is that as soon as they know that somebody is deceased, they call into our comm centre as a code 90. As soon as that happens, our comm centre notifies me and so now immediately welfare knows about it. But if they have got to attend a particularly nasty incident where there are multiple injuries or a bad injury, there is no way of passing that in. They are just working on doing it and so there is no notification coming back to let us know that this has happened. What we tend to do is go through the incident browser the next day and try to find the jobs that might have been particularly nasty and then make contact with the station and that sort of thing.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So, if there was a compulsory code or something that was put on an incident report or something —

Mr Wingate: What I would like to see is another code that says, “Nasty job, major injury”, or whatever. They could call that in the same way and manner, and that could be notified back in exactly the same way; it is a very simple process. I would also like to see probably our recording

system changed in some way so that it details more so that it is easier to go through the browser and find those other jobs that perhaps they will not call in, but potentially could be a problem.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA is moving to WebEOC.

Mr Wingate: What is that?

The CHAIRMAN: WebEOC; I have forgotten what the acronym stands for right now, but it is a web-based emergency operations centre; I think that is all it is.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: It is like a sort of running sheet.

The CHAIRMAN: It is a running sheet and you can do it from a mobile phone or an iPad or whatever, and it updates it as it is happening.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: But that probably would not have the level that I think Ron is talking about.

Mr Wingate: No; we do have an incident browser so that everything that comes back via the radio from the crew is recorded and it is typed there, but they are not going to be calling and saying, “Look, we have got a person who has had a leg amputated.” That sort of detail is not there, so you have to read it and sort of think, “Three people have been taken away in an ambulance. That doesn’t sound like that was too good”.

The CHAIRMAN: So what happens when Ron Wingate is on leave?

Mr Wingate: We have an associate chaplain who is another Salvation Army officer who covers the pager while I am away. He has other duties, of course, with the Salvation Army, but he covers the pager so if anything happens and he is called, he will attend in the same way. But yes, that is part of the reason that I am saying that it is probably time that we built the welfare team up a little bit and perhaps had two like the police have.

The CHAIRMAN: Ron, I think we have exhausted our questions. Is there any closing statement that you would like to make? Is there anything you would like to add in that we have not asked a question on?

Mr Wingate: No, I do not think so, other than to say that I think with the resources that we have, our program works very, very well. We can only continue to try to improve that and I think it is worth looking at areas where we are failing and look at how we can improve them. I do not believe that looking at problems is a negative; it is a positive because then you can fix problems if you acknowledge them. If you do not acknowledge them, you are never going to fix them.

The CHAIRMAN: All right, Ron, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this morning and thank you for the work you are doing; it is excellent. I will just read a closing statement so you know what happens exactly from here on. Again, thank you for your evidence before the committee this morning. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. 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 by these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee’s consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you very much.

Mr Wingate: Sure, thank you very much; thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

Hearing concluded at 10.40 am
