

**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, 20 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 9.59 am**HOWELL, MR ROGER****President, Metropolitan Volunteer Sea Rescue, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: This committee hearing is a proceeding of 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 Howell: Yes.

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

Mr Howell: Yes.

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

Mr Howell: Yes.

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

Mr Howell: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, do you have an opening statement that you would like to make?

Mr Howell: No, I do not think so.

The CHAIRMAN: Just to set the scene for us, can you tell us exactly what the Metropolitan Volunteer Sea Rescue Group is and what they do?

Mr Howell: Yes, the Metropolitan Volunteer Sea Rescue Group was formed in 2004, initially as an alliance between the three major metropolitan volunteer groups, being Whitfords Volunteer Sea Rescue Group, Fremantle Sea Rescue and Cockburn Volunteer Sea Search and Rescue Group. It was formed at the time of the introduction by the then minister, Michelle Roberts, of the FESA act, which sought to bring all 37 groups in the state under the control of the new FESA act. The metropolitan groups felt that the provisions of the act would restrict them in their capacity to serve the boating community in Perth. Because of certain sections of the act which we found restrictive, we decided it would be inappropriate for us to come under the act. That created some consternation within certain members of the FESA public service, and a lot of problems arose in the early years which revolved around actions taken to compel the three groups to come under the FESA act. It was only with the assistance of you, Mr Chairman, that the minister formed a working party with the task to come up with a suitable working arrangement. That was finally resolved to the satisfaction, we understand, of the minister, the Parliament and the three groups in November 2004. Since that time we have operated under what we refer to as a service agreement or a memorandum of understanding—basically a very simple two-page document that was agreed with all the parties in 2004 which basically says the groups will continue to do what they have always done for some 40 years each, and each year they will account to government for the moneys expended and, if the government is happy with that service, it will continue for another 12-month period. That is the way it has been since the inception in 2004.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks for that. Can you give us a bit of an overview of the operations that the Metropolitan Volunteer Sea Rescue Group undertakes and, I suppose, the boundaries that you operate in?

Mr Howell: The agreement concerning the Metropolitan Volunteer Sea Rescue Group, which as I said earlier commenced with simply the three groups but over a period of years has extended to include other people with certain expertise who have been admitted to the membership of the board, if you like, to advise on other matters, gave us the responsibility for all the metropolitan waters from the wreck of the *Alkimos* in the northern extremities past Mindarie all the way down to the Cockburn grain terminal, all the rivers within the city—that is, the Swan, Avon and Canning Rivers—and Rottnest Island and all the surrounding islands to a distance of some 30 nautical miles out to sea. We started, as I said, in 2004. We have maintained our membership at around about 200 volunteers and 12 dedicated rescue vessels. Since inception in 2004, when we started we had 740 rescues in the next 12 months. The figure as of last year, as I recall mentioning to the chair and the deputy chair, now exceeds well over 1 200 rescues a year. During that time we were very fortunate to benefit from the actions of the deputy chair, who managed to increase our funding in 2008. That is the way it still stands today.

The CHAIRMAN: The types of rescues that you do and the traumas that you attend?

Mr Howell: Yes.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Just following on from that, I have been unfortunate enough to be a beneficiary of your services! The inquiry is particularly looking at, I guess, more the traumatic events and the cumulative effects of those on first responders—the people who see that. One that comes to mind immediately in the Whitfords area, which I know is also your local club, is the deputy principal of Kinross College, and you found the boat. I think some of the best witnesses we have heard from have given, I guess, accounts of what have been challenging incidents and some of those things that you have had to deal with.

Mr Howell: Yes, certainly. It is a coincidence that this is happening this morning, because our boys are out on the ocean now where a surfer has been attacked by a shark. Already, actions are being put in place to provide support to that skipper and his crew. I do not know whether the person was injured or whether he managed to avoid the attack, but anyway, that is happening as we speak. Yes, that particular incident was a very traumatic one. Our existing commander and one of his crew were the ones who recovered the body from the ocean. Sorry, I go back—that was the Queensland boy a year before, who drowned after the boat sank. Father and son swam to shore but the other fellow died. Yes, look, we have over the years needed to recover bodies from the ocean. We have in place across the three groups procedures to help volunteers deal with their trauma. In Whitfords' case, we have a permanent chaplain within the group. He is a member of Whitfords Sea Rescue, the Right Reverend John Ward. He is our first port of call when a member of the group has experienced a traumatic event. Certainly the recovering of deceased and/or bodies that have been in the water for a few weeks or a few days are traumatic incidents. I think over the years at Whitfords alone we have recovered I think around 15 bodies. That is the worst of the trauma that a volunteer would have to undertake. Other things would involve injury to members of the community. Again, the only counselling or the only benefit we offer to our people is counselling from the chaplaincy. We have strategies in place to minimise the amount of trauma that people are put under. We are fortunate, by having enough volunteers, to minimise that degree. We also have very extensive training processes that help to minimise the number of incidents that volunteers might find themselves in—dangerous situations, being injured themselves, for example. In my knowledge, and I have been in it now for 20 years, there has never been a volunteer lost at sea doing volunteer sea search and rescue. We have access, if we require it, to the police chaplaincy to assist on matters, and in fact to the FESA facilities if wanted, but that has never been used.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: We are talking about 1 200 rescues a year, or 1 200 incidents, I suppose. Can you maybe break them down into numbers? How many would be searches, how many would be boats breaking down and what have you?

[10.00 am]

Mr Howell: For incidents, I cannot remember the exact figure, but I think it is approaching 3 000 people who were in difficulty and needed to be helped. The majority by far are simply motor breakdowns and that sort of thing—at least 90 per cent would be straightforward. For fatalities, in any given year there are probably no more than four or five. For extended searches, which put a great deal of stress on the volunteers, again, it is maybe half a dozen to a dozen.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You say you have been doing this for 20 years. Have you personally observed any instances where volunteers have been affected in any way because of the work that they have done; that is, their conduct or their behaviour has changed?

Mr Howell: I am thinking back over the instances where I was the commander at Whitfords and members had been exposed to the recovery of deceased people, and some of them were very young people, some of them were children that had to be recovered. I do recall a couple of them making comment—they had obviously never seen this sort of thing before and had to do it; and it is not something that the police want us to do, but quite often there is no choice, so they will say, “I am sorry, but we have got nobody; can you go and do it?”, so we do. Yes, there have been a couple of people who have said that they felt deeply moved and distressed sometimes. One chap said to me, “It was just like looking at a mannequin from a shop window”, when he recovered a young lass who had committed suicide. I will explain it this way. The Whitfords groups work in squads. So we have the same group of six people who work together for years and years and years. So there is a camaraderie and support network within that. So we can look and say, “Johnny is taking this pretty hard”, for example, because we have a closer relationship than one that simply says, “I need four people—one, two, three, four”. So in that respect we watch over our own, and because of the unique manner of working in a squad, where each person is dependent on the other, we also get to know each other a lot better and know our families and children and so on. So there is that view of looking out for our own. We are very conscious of the fact that we cannot help anybody if we do not look after ourselves.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: How does what you do cross over with, say, the water police?

Mr Howell: The water police are the hazard management authority, and they are the people responsible for the coordination of sea search and rescue. We are a resource that they may call upon if they wish; or, if it does not involve a matter for the water police, we will go to assist under the terms of our agreement with the state—with FESA. Our relationship is one of they are the coordinators and we are the resource. The service agreement actually stated that the metropolitan rescue group would be the first volunteer responder to anything that happens in the metropolitan area. We do not have a problem with the water police being the coordination authority—they are the best at it. We have from time to time disagreed with the deployment protocol that they use, and sometimes we have complained of not being advised of an incident when it is outside our front door, and that has been the subject of a couple of reports to the coroner over the last four or five years.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: When you say “deployment”, if there is a prospect of either criminal proceedings or a coronial inquest, the police maybe say to you, “You stay away”, or, “We will do it”? Is that what you are talking about, or is it something else?

Mr Howell: No. It is more like the incident when a gentleman fell off the Fremantle traffic bridge into the water. Fremantle sea rescue group are literally around the corner. The water police decided not to call out the volunteer resources, and the deceased was found two days later. They sent a police boat to have a look around. Our argument was, and still is—we put this to the coroner—if a

man falls into the water, drunk or not, everything should be thrown at him immediately, and not “Have a look, see if it is getting worse, call in another boat; see if it is getting worse, call in another boat”, and so on. Our objection to that was that resources that were trained, know the area and have manned vessels within the vicinity, were not advised. The same has happened in other instances at Hillarys Marina when I have actually been the skipper on the boat and a person has fallen into the water and the police came from Fremantle and never called Whitfords. There are reasons for that, and we understand that. Part of it has been that we unfortunately have a bit of a reputation, members of the committee, that when we were told to go home after a search and we believe there is still a chance that that schoolteacher, for example, may still be alive, we will not home, and that upsets the water police. It does not upset the minister, who has actually assured me that we do not have to go home. We will continue to search for that person if we think there is a chance, because that is what we do 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We have been doing it for 40 years. We have got 105 members at Whitfords. So no one member is ever on duty for more than eight or nine hours, and then a replacement squad is taken in. Even in extended searches, such as the mayday hoax that was a year and half ago, I think it was—that young man got six months for that—even after that, which was searching for 12 hours through the night off Moore River, we do not allow volunteers to drive home. They are tired. We organise transport. We organise food and other things to make sure that they are being maintained. There is a whole network behind the skipper and the crew, and the radio operators.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Why I asked that question was: So there is no guarantee in, if you like, the most gruesome or shocking cases that you will be shielded from that? There is no protocol? That is what I wanted to know.

Mr Howell: No, there is not, primarily because we are on the waters every weekend and public holiday, and because we patrol, we are usually the first to get to the incident, and, whatever it is, we deal with it—whether it is a fire on a boat, an injured person, a drowning, or whatever—we have to deal with it, and secure the situation, waiting then for the police to give direction as to what is to happen. Obviously they may say, “Just mark the position; do not touch the deceased”, and all that sort of stuff. So we have an operating protocol, and we work with the police so that we do not taint anything that may be the subject of another inquiry somewhere else.

The CHAIRMAN: Roger, can you tell us, after you have a traumatic event and you have picked up a deceased person, or a crew has, is there a protocol in place for actually dealing with that? I know you said that you all know each other and you watch out for each other. Has any training been given to the crews as to what to look out for?

Mr Howell: No, there has not.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think that would be of benefit?

Mr Howell: I guess it could. All these things would help. We only, as the management of the organisation, look at our people and try to identify people who may be—the standard procedure is that in the event of a traumatic incident, actions are put in place to minimise the amount of trauma. It is not a formulated procedure. It is one of counselling, and it is one of giving them a period of time before they go back on duty—for example, they may want to take a few weeks away from the work. But we do not have any open procedures that may be available. For example, I know that under the FESA act, their volunteers have standard operating procedures to deal with that. But, no, we do not.

Mr A.P. JACOB: You mentioned earlier that you have access to a WA Police chaplain. I am assuming that you would be more likely to go to WAPOL to get those services than FESA? Is that right?

[10.20 am]

Mr Howell: Yes; we would, mainly because it is the water police we are working with or for, if you like. In the event of that, police officers may also need to debrief with the chaplains. It is not something that has happened very often. I know with the school teacher, for example, a FESA offer was made to us, which was very nice but, yes the water police or our own people.

The CHAIRMAN: What training has your own chaplain had in counselling or recognising psychological trauma?

Mr Howell: I am not sure of his medical qualifications or psychological training, Mr Chairman. He is a fully ordained minister in the Anglican Church; other than that I have no idea.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Is he fully operational, so he can talk the talk and all of that?

Mr Howell: Yes. He attends our meetings; he gets to know the people. He supports us. For example, in the trial of the mayday hoax, he sat with the skippers, crew and the members in the courtroom in his clerical garb to help because there was a degree of anger and frustration sitting in that court room and looking at the young man concerned. He is physically involved not just when called upon. He gets involved in day-to-day meetings and gets to know the people and makes his offer available even on matters that are outside volunteer sea search and rescue. Obviously if there are marital problems or financial problems, whatever; they know they can talk to the reverend.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I am still trying to get a firmer grip on what would be the harder incidents you deal with. You mentioned there is a lot of anger around the mayday scenario. You mentioned somewhere that children had been rescued in the past.

Mr Howell: Recovered from the ocean.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Seized from the ocean, sorry. It is harder again I imagine and incidents where people may be known to the crew.

Mr Howell: Yes.

Mr A.P. JACOB: What is the worst case scenario you have come up against? How have those people dealt with those situations in the medium and long term?

Mr Howell: By far the worst scenario is having to recover a child who has died. Thankfully, that does not happen very often, but having said that, there have been cases, particularly around the Rottneest area where I think a father and two children died but the mother managed to swim to Stragglers Rock, I think it was, and hung on until the Fremantle boys got her. That would be the worst. Physical injuries and trauma to people we have gone to help being caught in boat fires, for example, that sort of thing is a traumatic event. Dealing with it is something I guess comes from the different types of people we have. Whitfords sea rescue, dare I say it without sounding old, has an older population and a lot of them are retired military service people. In Fremantle sea rescue, for example, they are a younger population. There are young professionals because of the Fremantle hospital there so they get a lot of volunteers, ethnic communities and that sort of thing. They deal with their situation differently. We do not have a procedure in place to deal with matters because it depends on who is involved and how they handle things. All we can do is make it available to them that there are sources out there that can assist them if they have trouble processing the difficulty. All we can do as an organisation is make them aware of those resources and minimise the pressure we place on them for a period of time—until they are comfortable with that.

Mr A.P. JACOB: You have some amazing longevity service in your organisation, you are lucky with people like this. You mention that the crews stay together for a long time but with some of your more senior members, will you bring in newer members into their crews so they have that experience around them?

Mr Howell: That is right. I guess we are fortunate by having 105 volunteers, particularly in Whitfords, the biggest in the state. We can afford to do that so that we are not placed under the pressure of smaller groups to fast-track training and qualifications. In a remote or regional area

where there are only 10 people, you have to very quickly train someone to be the skipper. In our case skippers have at least 10 years in a group before they take charge of a vessel and besides a very experienced skipper, there has to be an experienced, qualified senior crewman and at least one crewman before we can add trainees to them. A trainee, no matter what his age, someone who has absolutely no idea about what is going on, is always going to be placed with people who have had at least five, 10, 15, or in Ken's case 40 years in the group.

The CHAIRMAN: Roger, do you know of sea rescue groups in the eastern states that have procedures in place to deal with trauma and stress?

Mr Howell: I do not know whether they have or what is involved, no.

The CHAIRMAN: You say with Whitfords you have 105 and it is very seldom that anyone would do a shift longer than eight or nine hours in a rescue situation or in a surf situation. How are the families looked after if a husband is out on the boat for eight hours? Is there any sort of correspondence or communication of that person who is out there? Do they worry?

Mr Howell: I have not asked my wife to be honest. I guess they do, but, no, there is no formal process of liaising with the family. Part of the operational structure in anything but normal day-to-day stuff is that the operation's team will consist of a liaison person, who liaises with the police, with the media and with members of the family of both the volunteer and the person we are going to help, particularly when this involves a search for someone who has not come home for tea. People who are given that role are very experienced members of the group; the commander usually is the person who will deal with the family of the deceased and that person usually has many years' knowledge in either sea search and rescue or in the services generally. You both know our commander, Jeff Sparrow, and so on. There are procedures to help the family of the person we are going to see. Very rarely do we get a problem with a volunteer's family inquiring after him. This day and age with mobile phones, he just rings from wherever the heck he is and says, "I'm still out here."

The CHAIRMAN: You have a pretty tight group and the families are involved in the group as well with numerous functions.

Mr A.P. JACOB: The previous commander met his wife in the group when she was 16, I think.

Mr Howell: Yes; you are dead right. He is about to be the commander again next week. Indeed, there is a lot of that. As you both know, our oldest member is 93 years of age and to this day he mans radios from his home. It is getting a bit difficult now but, yes, Henry Hall is still with us. One other thing that has occurred recently that the committee may care to know about is that metropolitan sea rescue has in the past few weeks now been asked to take on an additional role, and we are very pleased to do that. That role was one asked of us by FESA to assist it in providing advice in the events of natural disasters. Last week, for example, we had all those terrible storms come through. We were asked to provide someone who could sit in the FESA operations centre in the bunker at Belmont to offer advice on matters that affect the waterways, such as the Port Bouvard jetty that broke away and took boats with it. We were very pleased to do that. I took the first day's shift there and found we were now working with Mandurah and Rockingham sea rescues to help communicate because the operations centre in Belmont did not know, for example, who looks after that territorial piece of water—who would I call to go to that. We have been doing that for a couple of days during that particular incident. But since then we have also been asked to work on a cooperative arrangement with the FESA fire sections in relation to: what do we do if there is a fire on Rottnest Island; what do we do if a cliff collapses and people are trapped; how do we get men and equipment over there? The ferries cannot get into Geordie Bay or Parakeet Bay; they are too big. We are now working with them and our fleet of vessels and a commercial operator off Fremantle to say, "We can move your men and equipment 24 hours a day to wherever it is needed." Whilst we started on that line some few months ago now, two weeks ago we were approached by the SES from FESA to say we are preparing a tsunami response plan for the metropolitan coast, can

we talk to you guys because we need to know where a helicopter can land; where can we set up a medical triage centre; where is there equipment? Two of the members here have been to our premises. We have a perfect place there to set up a hospital or a medical centre. We have helicopter landing spots; we know all the jetties and marinas. We are finding that volunteer sea search and rescue is not simply a response to incidents; it is a lot of preparation to work out what to do when things go wrong. Hopefully, they will not. Other than that our relationship with FESA has been through—he is no longer at FESA; he is currently seconded to the Premier's office—but we meet regularly with the FESA officer, every four or five months I suppose. He asks what we are doing and we tell him what we are doing; we provide a written report every 12 months as to what we have done and, hopefully, it must be going well because the CEO of FESA last month offered us a three-year contract, which we have just signed and we will now continue in the same role for three years. We will be discussing the funding of that again because 2008 dollars is not as far as we want it in 2012, but that is another subject.

[10.32 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Roger, I know you have a number of females, but how many females are there in the metropolitan sea rescue, as a percentage?

Mr Howell: I would say 30 per cent are ladies. A lot choose only to do the radio duties, particularly the ones over 55 or 60 years of age who are not wanting, or capable of, being on the ocean. The younger ones? Certainly we have younger people who are willing to do that. But some of the others are dedicated purely to do radio operations from our building in Ocean Reef or from their individual homes with this new technology we are using for radio transmissions. But there are younger people in their 30s or 40s who are female crew. Our treasurer, for example, is the senior crew on one of the squads, and she has been with us for 25 or 30 years, I think.

The CHAIRMAN: Members any other questions? No.

Roger, thanks very much, and thanks for what you do. We do know about it—we are pretty close to it, Albert and I—and I am sure the others know about it in their particular areas as well. Thanks again for your attendance this morning, and thanks for what you do out there on the water for our boaties. Is there anything you would like to say before we close that we may not have covered? I know that is dangerous, given it is you, Roger!

Mr Howell: Yes. I think the last time I sat at this table, Mr Chairman, I did table, in camera, our concerns concerning the relationship within FESA and the metro sea rescue group. Suffice to say that nothing has changed, and it has been 10 years today, and whilst the group is growing the problem exists still. We have learned to live with that.

The CHAIRMAN: All right, Roger; thanks very much. Again, thanks for attending this morning and giving your evidence to the committee.

A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. Could 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, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Again, Roger, thanks very much.

Hearing concluded at 10.35 am
