



Community Development and Justice Standing Committee

The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers

**Report No. 4
May 2014**

Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Western Australia

**Community Development and Justice
Standing Committee**

**The Toll of Trauma on
Western Australian Emergency Staff
and Volunteers**

Report No. 4

Presented by

Ms M.M. Quirk, MLA

Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly on 15 May 2014

Chair's Foreword

REPORT number 10 of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee in the 38th Parliament (CDJSC 38th) was laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly on 27 September 2012. Titled *The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers*, it contained 27 Findings and 23 Recommendations. That report can be viewed at:



[http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID\)/F2C31700C3F0C38A48257A8600065F4D/\\$file/CDJSC-Toll+of+Trauma-+Final.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID)/F2C31700C3F0C38A48257A8600065F4D/$file/CDJSC-Toll+of+Trauma-+Final.pdf)

The previous Government had not responded to the Committee's recommendations before the 38th Parliament was prorogued, following the announcement of a State election. Despite three requests to the Minister for Emergency Services to provide a response to the report by the current Community Development and Justice Standing Committee (39th Parliament), the Committee has not received a response (*see Appendix Two for copies of letters*).

Given the importance of the recommendations and concerns about government inertia, the current Committee resolved on 7 May 2014 to bring the recommendations to the attention of the Government by tabling them in the current Parliament.

The CDJSC 38th report found that the processes used by State Government agencies to prepare and protect police officers, firefighters, paramedics and nearly 50,000 volunteers fell well behind processes in other jurisdictions. The CDJSC 38th report sought to correct that situation by recommending that chief executive officers of the relevant agencies be made accountable for the psychological wellbeing of staff and volunteers.

While the Inquiry's focus was initially on trauma suffered as a result of attending natural disasters, the CDJSC 38th Committee found that the cumulative effect of attending everyday emergencies often resulted in greater stress levels. However, none of the major State agencies currently has systems that can record traumatic events faced by their staff over a period of time.

The CDJSC 38th noted that this major shortcoming could be addressed quickly and reasonably cheaply, in particular by using systems already in place in similar agencies in Victoria and Queensland.

The CDJSC 38th also uncovered that, for various reasons but mainly monetary, the main emergency agencies do not undertake exercises and simulations based on the worst possible situation the State could face – for example an earthquake during peak

hour in Perth's central business district. Every five years or so resources should be provided for them to undertake a more realistic exercise based on the worst-case scenario - otherwise we will be as badly prepared as the communities in Christchurch, New Orleans and New York found themselves to be.

The CDJSC 38th spoke with 160 staff from emergency response agencies in Western Australia and in other jurisdictions, many of whom remain emotionally scarred. The CDJSC 38th applauded their professionalism in undertaking dangerous and sometimes traumatic tasks that most Western Australians will never have to encounter.

The CDJSC 38th thanked those who contributed to the report for their honesty in sharing their ideas on how to make our staff support systems in Western Australia more effective. The CDJSC 38th noted that it was now up to the Government to agree to its recommendations - most of which would cost little to implement.

It is important that the Government provide a response to the Parliament on the matters contained in Report 10, the Findings and Recommendations of which are reproduced in this Report. Failure to do so in a timely fashion will be evidence that the Government does not consider that those who serve our community in emergency response, who now need our support, are worthy of attention.



MS M.M. QUIRK, MLA
CHAIR

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Ministerial Response

In accordance with Standing Order 277(1) of the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly, the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee directs that the Premier and the Ministers for Child Protection, Emergency Services, Environment, Health and Police report to the Assembly as to the action, if any, proposed to be taken by the Government with respect to the recommendations of the Committee.

Findings and Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment and Police ensure their departments undertake a formal review by 30 June 2013 of the welfare services addressing stress and trauma provided to both their career and volunteer members.

Finding 1

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

Recommendation 2

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

Recommendation 3

Departmental chief executives of the Western Australia Police, Department of Environment and Conservation and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority should be made personally responsible for the psychological health (as a result of critical incident trauma) of their staff and volunteers. This obligation should be reflected in their performance agreements.

Finding 2

All of the State's emergency agencies have no mechanism for tracking their staff and the number of traumatic events they have attended over a particular period.

Recommendation 4

The Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment and Police ensure that their departments develop as a high priority a computer system for tracking their staff and the number of traumatic events they have attended over a particular period.

Finding 3

Most of the resources allocated by the State's emergency agencies to address staff trauma from critical incidents are located in Perth.

Recommendation 5

The Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment and Police request their departments to place some of their staff and resources providing trauma-related services in regional Western Australia.

Recommendation 6

The Minister for Health immediately establish the road trauma counselling service to be funded by the Road Trauma Trust Account.

Finding 4

The State's main emergency agencies have difficulty identifying exactly what are their costs from staff trauma and what they spend on preparing their staff for trauma flowing from critical incidents.

Recommendation 7

The Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment and Police ensure their departments include in their annual reports the expenditure they have incurred on preparing their staff for critical incidents, and for managing their response to these incidents.

Finding 5

Section 1 of clause 35 of the Public Sector Award 1992 currently requires State Government employees who volunteer for the Australian Red Cross in Western Australia to take personal or annual leave in order to assist during a disaster.

Recommendation 8

The Premier amend Clause 35 of the Public Sector Award 1992 so that State Government employees who volunteer to assist the Australian Red Cross during a disaster are not required to take personal or annual leave.

Recommendation 9

Local government authorities incorporate into their Local Emergency Management Plans their procedures for dealing with any trauma experienced by bushfire brigade volunteers, having regard to best practice in managing trauma.

Finding 6

All of the State's emergency responder agencies are currently not using the industry-standard approach of Psychological First Aid in preparing their staff to deal with the trauma of critical incidents, but are still applying a debriefing approach that research has shown is either not useful or actually exacerbates the stress of some staff who participate in it.

Recommendation 10

The Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment and Police provide additional funds in the 2013-14 Budget so that the State's emergency response agencies can implement a Psychological First Aid approach to preparing staff to deal with critical incidents and disasters, as is used in other Australian jurisdictions.

Finding 7

The use of a Psychological First Aid approach more broadly across a community helps to build its resilience and lower the number of people traumatised by a disaster.

Finding 8

The State's main emergency agencies are undergoing a cultural change as they employ additional younger members and women. This should ensure that more staff engage with the support services offered by their welfare and health branches.

Finding 9

The State's emergency agencies managers may not understand the possible impact of trauma on staff in a disciplinary situation.

Finding 10

Emergency agencies across Australia have struggled to fund compulsory annual physical well-being tests for their staff. Efforts to provide a voluntary psychological component to these tests have not been well-supported by their staff.

Finding 11

The State's emergency agencies use similar processes to deliver programs to their police, firefighters, paramedics and volunteers to address issues of trauma. Their staff attend the same critical incidents (eg car crash or fire) and train to support each other during a disaster.

Finding 12

There should be economies of scale if Western Australian emergency agencies combine to jointly deliver their welfare programs aimed at reducing staff trauma.

Recommendation 11

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

Finding 13

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

Recommendation 12

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

Finding 14

The Department of Health, the Coroner's Court and the Department for Child Protection do not offer peer support programs for their staff undertaking stressful tasks during a disaster.

Recommendation 13

The Attorney General and the Ministers for Health and Mental Health fund their departments to establish a peer support program by the end of 2013 for their staff undertaking stressful tasks during a disaster or critical incident.

Finding 15

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

Recommendation 14

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

Finding 16

The State's emergency agencies undertake regular planning, exercises and simulations for the most likely disaster, not one posing the worst outcome for the State.

Recommendation 15

The Ministers for Health, Emergency Services, Environment and Police provide additional funds to their agencies so that a detailed exercise is held on a regular basis based on a disaster that will create the worst outcome for the State.

Recommendation 16

The Minister for Emergency Services request the State Emergency Management Committee to review by June 2013 the sharing of data between the State's emergency response agencies using the WebEOC software and any further enhancements that can be made to this process.

Finding 17

FESA's current procedures for using relief staff across the metropolitan area makes it difficult for those staff to build a supporting network of colleagues to help reduce their stress from attending a critical incident.

Finding 18

The ability to remain in contact with their family remains an important issue for deployed emergency agency staff. This is very important where a deployment period exceeds a regular shift or where staff are deployed to a very large disaster.

Finding 19

In their response to the Queensland floods, the use of social media by emergency agencies alleviated the stress of first responders having to deal with media enquiries. Social media postings allowed the media, the community and the families of first responders to follow the progress of the disaster response.

Recommendation 17

The Fire and Emergency Services Authority should expand their use of social media to better inform the Western Australian community.

Finding 20

A robust database to record staff activity at the scene of a prolonged disaster is paramount to the proper fatigue management of staff and to monitor any over-exposure to trauma.

Recommendation 18

The Chief Executive Officer of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority request the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council to include a new module in the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System to guide the provision of welfare services for emergency service workers during a disaster.

Finding 21

Chaplaincy services, peer support officers and employee assistance providers all undertake important, but different, roles in supporting staff responding to critical incidents or disasters. The deployment of these supporting services should follow a well-developed plan that has been regularly reviewed and exercised.

Finding 22

The compensation received by first responders in Western Australia is currently skewed towards staff who receive a physical injury rather than those suffering mental trauma.

Recommendation 19

The Minister for Police immediately instigate processes to ensure that the psychological well-being of officers is at the forefront of the Western Australia Police's staff planning. These processes should include all officers being trained in psychological first aid, with subsequent regular refresher courses. Senior officers should be the first priority for psychological first aid training.

Finding 23

Medical records for the past five years indicate that WAPOL's medical retirement rate for stress-related illness is about seven times that for FESA.

Recommendation 20

The State's emergency response agencies should offer exit interviews to all of their staff and volunteers and use the information they gather to improve their trauma management procedures.

Finding 24

There are a small number of chaplains employed by the State's emergency agencies. Their work is a very important part of agency programs to assist staff deal with trauma after a critical incident, but their face-to-face activities are mainly confined to the metropolitan region.

Finding 25

Except for the Department for Child Protection and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the State emergency response agencies' peer support programs seem to be the strongest element of their processes to reduce staff trauma following critical incidents.

Recommendation 21

The Minister for Emergency Services ensure that the Fire and Emergency Services Authority's peer support program is rejuvenated as soon as possible with increased funding to provided added training for staff volunteering for this program.

Finding 26

The use of retired emergency staff as mentors or peer supporters has proven valuable overseas and is well-supported by all agencies which gave evidence to the Committee.

Recommendation 22

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

Finding 27

Currently State emergency agencies do not audit their EAP providers as to the veracity of information provided in invoices for payment.

Recommendation 23

The Ministers for Emergency Services, Environment and Police ensure their departments include provisions for regular external audits of invoices for payment in their next round of Employee Assistance Program contract negotiations.

Appendix One

Committee's functions and powers

The functions of the Committee are to review and report to the Assembly on: -

- a) the outcomes and administration of the departments within the Committee's portfolio responsibilities;
- b) annual reports of government departments laid on the Table of the House;
- c) the adequacy of legislation and regulations within its jurisdiction; and
- d) any matters referred to it by the Assembly including a bill, motion, petition, vote or expenditure, other financial matter, report or paper.

At the commencement of each Parliament and as often thereafter as the Speaker considers necessary, the Speaker will determine and table a schedule showing the portfolio responsibilities for each committee. Annual reports of government departments and authorities tabled in the Assembly will stand referred to the relevant committee for any inquiry the committee may make.

Whenever a committee receives or determines for itself fresh or amended terms of reference, the committee will forward them to each standing and select committee of the Assembly and Joint Committee of the Assembly and Council. The Speaker will announce them to the Assembly at the next opportunity and arrange for them to be placed on the notice boards of the Assembly.

Appendix Two

Correspondence relating to government response

Letters requesting a response to Report No.10 were sent to the Minister for Emergency Services on 22 May 2013, 17 October 2013 and 22 November 2013.

The Committee received a letter from the Minister for Emergency Services dated 6 December 2013, stating that the Department of Fire and Emergency Services response to the report had been submitted to the Department of Premier and Cabinet, who would be submitting a response on behalf of the Government.

Copies of the four letters are reproduced here.



**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

22 MAY 2013

HON J.M. FRANCIS MLA
Minister for Emergency Services,
Corrective Services and Veterans.

Re: Ministerial response to CDJSC Report 10 "The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers."

Dear Minister

The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee tabled Report 10 on 27 September 2012. A ministerial response had been due by 27 December 2012 under Standing Order 277(1). However this requirement fell away after Parliament was prorogued.

The findings of the report suggest that none of the State's emergency agencies have a system for tracking staff traumatic events faced by staff, and that support for staff repeatedly exposed to traumatic events is inadequate. The Committee is of the firm opinion that the 23 recommendations made within the report are extremely important, topical and of interest and value to the Assembly.

On behalf of the Committee I am therefore requesting that you provide a formal response to the recommendations of the report.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M Quirk".

Ms Margaret Quirk, MLA
CHAIR



**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

17 October 2013

Hon Joe Francis MLA
Minister for Emergency Services
Level 10 London House
216 St Georges Terrace
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Minister,

RE: Government response to CDJSC Report 10 “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers”

I refer to earlier correspondence dated 22 May 2013 requesting a formal response to the recommendations of the abovementioned report (copy of letter attached for your information).

This information is yet to be received as the Committee understands a collated response is being prepared on behalf of government. Given the importance of the report and its recommendations, it would be appreciated if you could please ensure this information is returned to the Committee. I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Margaret Quirk, MLA
CHAIR



**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

22 November 2013

Hon Joe Francis MLA
Minister for Emergency Services
Level 10 London House
216 St Georges Terrace
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Minister,

RE: Government response to CDJSC Report 10 “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers”

I refer to earlier correspondence dated 22 May 2013 and 17 October 2013 requesting a formal response to the recommendations of the abovementioned report.

This information is yet to be received as the Committee understands a collated response is still being prepared on behalf of government. Given that the report was tabled over a year ago, it would be appreciated if you could please expedite the process. I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Margaret Quirk, MLA
CHAIR

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**The Hon Joe Francis MLA
Minister for Emergency Services; Corrective Services;
Small Business; Veterans**

Our Ref: 51-00319/1



Ms Margaret Quirk MLA
Chair
Community Development and
Justice Standing Committee
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

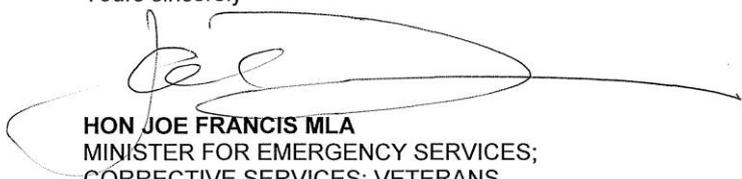
Dear Ms Quirk

Re: Government response to CDJSC Report 10 "The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers"

I refer to your correspondence dated 22 May, 17 October and 22 November 2013 requesting a formal response to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee Report 10 "The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers".

As previously communicated by my office, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services response to the report has been submitted to the Department of Premier and Cabinet who will be submitting a response on behalf of the Government.

Yours sincerely



**HON JOE FRANCIS MLA
MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES;
CORRECTIVE SERVICES; VETERANS**

6 DEC 2013