

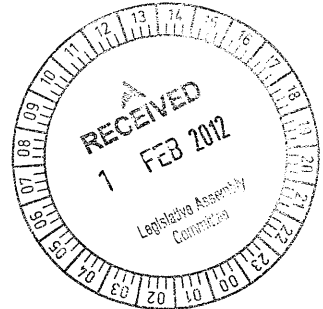


Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Education**

TOT Sub 12

Your ref :
Our ref : D11/0583649
Enquiries :

Mr David Worth
Principal Research Officer
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000



Dear Mr Worth

I refer to the letter from Mr A O'Gorman, MLA dated 12 September 2011 inviting the Department of Education to make a submission to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Department is pleased to provide the attached submission to the inquiry into the recognition and adequacy of the responses by State Government agencies to experience of trauma by workers and volunteers arising from disasters.

Should you require further information, please contact Mr Chris Gostelow, Manager School Psychology Services 9238 2240 or email Chris.Gostelow@det.wa.edu.au.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

SHARYN O'NEILL
DIRECTOR GENERAL

30 JAN 2012

Att.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the recognition and adequacy of the response by State Government agencies to experience of trauma by workers and volunteers arising from disasters

RESPONSE BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

BACKGROUND

The Department of Education's *Emergency and Critical Incident Management* policy describes the process for the management of on-site and off-site school related emergencies and critical incidents, including natural disasters. Effective management of emergencies and critical incidents involves consideration of prevention and preparedness as well as response and recovery with the intention of minimising trauma and distress to students and staff, and damage to property and ensuring the teaching and learning program is maintained or resumed as soon as possible. The policy is supported by a range of resources including planning templates, a manual for school psychologists and training.

Emergencies and critical incidents can vary significantly in impact and duration. Some will be discrete and short while others may be protracted and last for days or weeks. In the context of the Department's policy, emergencies or critical incidents include natural disasters (e.g. floods, bushfires) or human disasters (e.g. arson).

The Department requires all principals or site managers to develop and maintain an *Emergency and Critical Incident Management Plan*. This plan must be communicated to all staff with a copy sent to each Regional Executive Director so that important information is immediately accessible to others providing support. Plans must be developed in consideration of the services provided by other agencies such as the WA Police, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the Department for Child Protection and the Department of Health, including mental health services. Principals or site managers are encouraged to connect with the Local Emergency Management Committee, chaired by the local government. Regional Executive Directors are encouraged to affiliate with the District Emergency Management Committee, chaired by the WA Police.

At a central level the Department can monitor the data available from the *Online Incident Notification System* and use this to plan improved prevention, preparedness and response strategies. There is also an established process for system level coordination of the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery from significant emergencies or critical incidents which require Central Office support.

Senior officers within the School Psychology Service coordinate the mandated training for school psychologists in emergency and critical incident management and maintain senior level interagency partnerships, enabling collaborative support to school communities affected by significant emergencies or critical incidents, including natural disasters.

Management of emergencies and critical incidents, including natural disasters, in an educational context requires a different framework to that used by other agencies. Schools principals and teachers, assisted by school psychologists, have the unique responsibility under duty of care obligations to prioritise the safety, physical and

emotional welfare of children, before addressing their own emotional needs. The Department has structured support arrangements for all staff via the Employee Assistance Program and for school psychologists through the compulsory training provided for them that emphasises the promotion of self care strategies. Debriefing sessions are a routine part of all responses.

The Department's *Emergency and Critical Incident Management* policy also recognises the need to maintain State level inter-agency partnerships to enable collaborative support to school communities affected by significant emergencies or critical incidents and when required to assist in disaster response. In this context the Department of Education is a member of the State Welfare Committee (SWEC), an inter-agency committee recognised under State emergency arrangements. The State emergency management endorsed *Westplan Welfare* recognises the inter-agency partnerships that will operate for personal support for people and communities affected by disasters. The Department is a signatory to this State plan.

The Department has been involved in recent years in the provision of services in a range of emergencies and critical incidents requiring system level responses including the Roleystone and Toodyay fires, Carnarvon floods, Bali bombing and the H1N1 (swine influenza) virus. The terms of reference of this inquiry narrows the Department's response to declared natural disasters.

A copy of the Department's *Emergency and Critical Incident Management* policy is available online at www.policies.det.wa.edu.au.

Whether existing agency responses adequately address the trauma experienced by staff and volunteers during and after declared natural disasters which have occurred since 2001

The Department provides support for staff affected by natural disaster. In the recent Margaret River bushfire, for example, school psychologist, regional leaders and school chaplains were involved in providing direct support for staff affected and in ensuring they had details of the Department's Employee Assistance Program (PRIMEXL). Further, PRIMEXL were contacted to ensure any requests for counselling from Departmental staff were handled promptly.

As previously outlined, the Department's *Emergency Management and Critical Incident Management* policy describes the responsibilities of the school principal or site manager and senior officers within the Department, to incidents such as natural disasters. The policy has been regularly reviewed to ensure it remains in line with current requirements.

Comprehensive training for school psychologists is tailored to statewide needs as well as good practice in an international context, and includes a competency credentialling based on demonstrated knowledge, skills, experience and aptitude. One of the modules is focused on the monitoring of and addressing of responder care, both at a professional level and caring for self.

Many schools include staff training, as part of preparedness. Similarly, during and following the response phase briefing sessions are routine, literature and links are provided, wellbeing activities are frequently organised, and there is widespread promotion of the support available from the Employee Assistance Program, local counselling agencies and through the general practitioner mental health care initiative. These services are promoted to and used by the range of responders including school staff and school psychologists.

Where the Department's School Psychology Service has been mobilised due to a natural disaster (e.g. Roleystone bushfire) and this response is connected with the Department of Child Protection under SWEC arrangements, debriefings are regularly held, and staff coping is monitored and managed by senior leadership, as well as through Department of Education resources.

The barriers to those suffering trauma from accessing available assistance services

The School Psychology Service ensures a substantial amount of information, conveyed verbally and in written form, is provided to principals, teachers and others following a critical incident. This focuses not only on the support of the children, young people and parents, but also on collegiate support and self-care. Educational material describing the range of reactions typically experienced following an emergency or critical incident is customarily distributed and discussed at many of the briefings and debriefings and there is emphasis on the importance of talking with colleagues, family and friends. Information is also provided about the Department's Employee Assistance Program. In the aftermath of a disaster there is a range of free counselling also provided by other agencies, as well as the Medicare rebated counselling available through General Practitioners

Ultimately it is possible that personal choice or deferment may prevent staff members from accessing the available support.

Where natural disasters occur in remote locations, distance may provide a barrier to accessing some services. The Department's Employee Assistance Program does provide a telephone counselling service via a freecall number, available 24 hours per day, and staff are encouraged to utilise this service. There are also instances where support agencies deployed to the disaster area may offer responder counselling.

The measures to mitigate any health impacts from trauma to those State Government workers and volunteers who responded to a declared disaster

During emergencies and critical incidents, including natural disasters, those in leadership positions (Departmental or lead agency) monitor the length of shifts, the rest and meal breaks, as well as the coping and fatigue of their teams. There is also access to collegiate support and self care awareness-raising. The availability of the Employee Assistance Program, is promoted as being available for face-to-face as well as telephone counselling. The service is available by telephone 24 hours per day, 7 days per week via a freecall number.

School Psychologists who provide support to others affected by natural disasters are routinely contacted and monitored by their professional leader.

Pamphlets can be distributed to all responders, describing the range of reactions people have in response to such events as well as strategies for self-care. Staff are reminded of the importance of accessing medical care if symptoms persist. School psychologists provide personal support to school staff through Psychological First Aid, however the Department's Employee Assistance Program or other professional services are the providers of longer term support. All described services are also recommended to school psychologists, both at the time of the critical incident or natural disaster, and in the training module which has a focus on self care.

i) What pre-planning and training activities do you undertake with your staff and volunteers to deal with trauma before a disaster?

The Department's approximately 340 school psychologists are required to undertake the Department's three day training program in emergency and critical incident management. Refresher courses and other training courses

are available subsequent to this training. Content is tailored to ensure skills and knowledge of school and State matters, with an emphasis on developing skills in assisting with prevention, preparation, response, recovery and review. Competency is recognised at the end of the program for the registered psychologists, who have demonstrated their knowledge, skills, and experience in providing assistance. Further, a small number of senior school psychologists have demonstrated advanced knowledge and skills and have been awarded with a Level 3 Certificate which recognises their role in leadership within the Department of Education and in working collaboratively with other emergency agencies. These senior staff also provide monitoring and support to school psychologists during and post incidents.

The training program for school psychologists, delivered by a team of senior psychologists holding Level 3 competency accreditation, focuses on all aspects of emergency and critical incident management knowledge and skills development. This is updated regularly in line with national and international evidence based research, including normal and concerning reactions and has a dedicated module on self-care. The program addresses skills and knowledge in all areas including symptoms of stress, grief, compassion fatigue and the risks from vicarious traumatisation. Staff are very aware of possible emotional risks to self and they are provided with resources and avenues to address these. There is a strong culture of collegiate support within the School Psychology Service with supervision and professional consultation available from leadership within the service.

School Psychologists have had access to a training program on Disaster Counselling delivered by the Department of Health and the Department of Child Protection, as part of inter-agency preparedness and collaboration.

In addition to Departmental training in emergency and critical incident management, all school psychologists are required to complete a two-day training program in suicide prevention. Gatekeeper training, facilitated by one of the eight accredited trainers within the Department, has a necessary focus on suicide prevention but also supports school psychologists in postvention strategies and in the support of self. While all school psychologists must undertake this training, it is also offered to school nurses, chaplains and youth workers working in public schools as well as pre-service school psychologists.

Existing and aspiring school leaders can access the Department's *Licence to Leadership* training program which builds leadership capacity and provides an appreciation of the critical role played in the executive leadership of schools. This 12 month program involves being confronted with problems that represent the complexities inherent in leadership, decision-making and compliance. As part of a 'virtual school' two-day experience, participants are supported by professionals to resolve 'real life' problems, including responding to emergencies and critical incidents.

ii) **What annual budget you spend on these pre-event activities?**

The School Psychology Service training budget covers the cost for school psychologists. The training is incorporated as part of the Induction Program.

Training is provided annually for both the two-day program for school psychologists and the Level 3 accreditation. This training, alongside Gatekeeper training in suicide prevention, is required training for all school psychologists and is built in to the professional learning calendar of the School Psychology Service.

iii) **What programs do you undertake during a disaster to assist your staff and volunteers deal with trauma?**

At a school level there would be daily briefings and debriefing sessions for staff. School psychologists providing support are monitored by professional leaders and senior staff and made aware of collegiate and professional support available. There would be specific briefings if the disaster or event is high impact, has a widespread effect or is an uncommon event.

As previously outlined, during and following an emergency or critical incident there is regular awareness raising for all staff regarding self-care as well as encouragement to seek assistance via the Employee Assistance Program.

iv) **What post-event activities do you undertake with your staff and volunteers to deal with trauma arising from a disaster?**

Individual or small group discussions are facilitated in addition to operational debriefs. There is ongoing monitoring by school and regional leadership and encouragement to seek help and access collegiate support.

v) **What annual budget do you spend on these post-event activities?**

Funding is made available on a needs basis