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## **Inquiry into criminal activity and law enforcement during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The Police Federation of Australia (PFA) thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. As the Committee is aware, the PFA represents the professional and industrial interests of in excess of 64,000 police officers across every police jurisdiction in the country.

### **The Pandemic's Impact on Crime:**

Much of the current anecdotal evidence points to a decrease in many crime types during the COVID-19 pandemic period. However there have been contrasting trends in other crime types. For instance, data from Western Australia for 2019-20 crime rates, indicate that while overall offence rates declined by more than 5.2 per cent, Offences Against the Person ("violent offences") increased 5.1 percent. In contrast, the rate of offences against property fell by 9.3 per cent. The rate of property offences being the lowest recorded over the last 13 years.

Rates for family-related offences in WA also increased, including threatening behaviour (14.1 per cent) and assault (9.5 per cent). Rates for both were the highest ever recorded, while graffiti experienced the highest increase of all at 18.4 per cent.

It must be noted the above data does not solely relate to the COVID period and would need to be more thoroughly evaluated during that specific time frame but offers an indication of likely trends.

At this early stage, the PFA has not been able to obtain comparative data from other jurisdictions. However, we hope that such data will be available by the time the Committee commences public hearings. It should be noted that most of the current data around COVID-19's impact on crime in Australia is still being based on media reports, which draws on crime data, generally provided by police, however limited details of that data have been critically analysed.

An analysis of crime statistics, again from Western Australia, indicates that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on family and domestic violence in the first 6 months of 2020. The number of assaults and threatening behaviour offences were more than 14.5 per cent higher than the baseline average of previous years and breaches of violence restraining orders were also higher than average.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) is involved in various research initiatives, including; the impacts of social distancing measures on recorded crime such as violent crime and property crime and of particular importance, research into **family and domestic violence trends**.

A Report released by the AIC in mid-July, 2020 titled *the prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic*, reported on a survey conducted in May 2020, where 15,000 women were surveyed using an online panel methodology, where they were asked about their experiences of domestic violence by a current or former partner in the three months prior to the survey. For many women, the pandemic coincided with the onset or escalation of violence and abuse. The survey can be located at – <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/sb/sb28>

Some crime statistics coming from police and other crime data agencies indicate no increase in domestic violence reports, yet other reports suggest that 50 percent of domestic violence service providers in New South Wales reported an increase in demand following the onset of the pandemic in February. At the same time, some domestic violence helplines have recorded a drop in calls of up to 30 percent, however none of this data has been subject to rigorous assessment. Again, the expertise of the AIC will be helpful for the Committee in tracking appropriate research into this very important issue.

The Australian New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency (ANZPAA) also undertakes work of this nature and they have developed an Innovation and Research team that has the capability and skills to undertake data and research projects and have done work in the family violence space. One of the advantages of ANZPAA doing research work is that policing, as a collective, own the Intellectual Property and not another institution.

## RECOMMENDATION

**The PFA recommends that the Committee engage with the AIC and ANZPAA to assist with any in-depth analysis of crime trends, particularly concerning family and domestic violence arising from COVID-19 and direct the Committee to relevant international research.**

### *Assaults on Police*

There can be no doubt that the pandemic has increased the risk of police officers being assaulted on the job. Data provided by the Western Australian Police Union (WAPU) shows a surge in police officers being assaulted in the first 6 months of 2020, 198 incidents of WA Police officers being assaulted, a rate 56.3 percent higher than the average of the previous three years. Almost one quarter of those officers assaulted had been spat on. NSW Police have seen an increase in violence with almost 250 officers a month assaulted.

There have been numerous incidents of police officers, simply trying to protect the community from members of the public who are not complying with coronavirus restrictions, being assaulted. Reports of people coughing, spitting and sneezing on police, nurses and other first responders has been well publicised during the pandemic across Australia. These acts remain particularly concerning, especially when offenders claim to be COVID -19 positive, placing greater stress on the victims and their families. As a result, several jurisdictions have acted to introduce specific legislation to cover such incidents and strengthen penalties for attacks on police and emergency service workers.

It is the PFA's view that any act of spitting, sneezing or deliberately coughing on police or other emergency services workers should be deemed a criminal offence, regardless of whether it is during a pandemic or not.

Another issue that has been raised within policing, is that a number of jurisdictions have provisions under various forensic procedures type legislation, for offenders to be mandatorily tested for communicable diseases if they knowingly expose an officer to the risk of acquiring that disease. This often occurs where an offender bites or spits blood or the like on an officer. There is a question over whether current provisions in legislation covers an act where an offender deliberately coughs, sneezes or spits on a police officer. Any such legislation across all jurisdictions should be amended to ensure such coverage.

## RECOMMENDATION

**That in all jurisdictions where forensic procedures style legislation exists, it be amended to ensure coverage includes; where anyone deliberately exposes a police officer or other first responder to a serious virus by coughing, spitting or some other like act and that all jurisdictions continue to strengthen penalties for attacks on police and emergency services workers.**

### *Serious and Organised Crime*

We note the Terms of Reference includes inquiring into transnational, serious and organised crime, including the impact of border controls.

The PFA has not been able to access confirmed data on the pandemic's impact on serious and organised crime, however we note anecdotal information provided to the PFA, that whilst many small businesses are struggling or in fact going out of business during the pandemic, it appears that no illicit tobacco retail outlets have closed during this time. This suggests that they are still easily obtaining illicit product to sell through the retail market. That anecdotal information also suggests that a significant amount of tobacco product is either being illegally produced locally or illegally imported. The Australian Border Force and its partner agencies, including the Australian Taxation Office, have disseminated numerous press releases since the start of 2020, highlighting significant seizures of such illicit product.

We also note the recent comments of the AFP Commissioner when in his address to the Press Club he said in relation to on-line child exploitation, "...the number of Australians undertaking this abhorrent crime has increased during COVID-19. There are more people at home on their computers and more desperate people across the world" and he also made the point that, "...COVID-19 has not decreased our terror threat".

A more detailed analysis of the COVID-19's impact on serious and organised crime and its impact on border security will be very helpful as an examination of any potential long-term impacts.

### **Police preparedness for the pandemic:**

Whilst COVID-19 has been labelled a once in 100-year occurrence, a lack of preparedness by police for such a pandemic has raised a number of issues that need to be taken into consideration for future planning scenarios.

The lack of immediate access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), a concern already identified during the bushfires and the splitting up of crews via the introduction of split shifts, were but two matters identified in the short term that could have minimised the risk of COVID-19 infection amongst members. The PFA has raised these issues in detail recently in both our submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements as well as the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, where the PFA emphasised the need for a collaborative approach to purchasing equipment such as PPE across police jurisdictions.

In 2008 the PFA recommended to Police Ministers and Commissioners the establishment of a National Collaborative Purchasing Model for Police Uniforms and Equipment, however an agreement across the jurisdictions for the implementation of such a model did not eventuate.

The PFA again takes this opportunity to suggest an Inquiry into building a national repository of Personal Protective Equipment for police for use in future national emergencies or disasters.

A Term of Reference for such an Inquiry could be to ask the Committee to examine:

1. Total annual expenditure by law enforcement agencies on personal protective equipment (PPE);
2. The scope for inter-agency collaborative procurement of policing's PPE by Australia's Commonwealth and State and Territory law enforcement agencies;
3. The scope to store such supplies to be readily available as required by jurisdictions;
4. The reduced duplication of effort likely to come from common procurement strategies, storage and agreed standards, specifications and cost sharing for the acquisition and application of such equipment and technology;
5. Potential savings which might be re-invested in front-line policing; and
6. The potential to improve the quality of such resources available to police personnel.

This would be central to the Australian government's drive to improve productivity, enhance national standards and performance and make monetary savings where feasible thus assisting in rebuilding our national economy. Any such outcome will likewise improve front line services to the community.

Apart from PPE, many other issues concerning the lack of preparedness by police were identified across the respective jurisdictions as the operation continued.

These included –

- The apparent lack of detailed plans for dealing with such a crisis. This forced many to play 'catch up' as issues unfolded, for instance, clearer communication to members;
- identifying what duties should and should not be performed, e.g. random breath testing activities. Documentation could have contained tiered actions, dependent on the members location, duty type, level of the pandemic restrictions and social distancing requirements at the time; and
- In the case of Victoria in particular, issues around the unique Emergency Management structure, which we have been advised, at times, frustrated Victoria Police's response.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**That the Committee recommend a model of collaborative purchasing and storage of personal protective equipment for Australia's police to ensure ready availability of supplies in times of urgent need.**

**And further**

**That the committee recommend that police forces conduct greater planning to enhance the police response to any potential future pandemic;**

**That such planning includes detailed communications processes to police officers about their roles and other operational requirements; and**

**In the case of Victoria, the Committee recommend a review of the unique Emergency Management structure for dealing with incidents such as the COVID 19 pandemic**

## **Impact on Police Resourcing:**

While the pandemic appears to have had an impact on general offending rates and traffic issues, other areas of policing required a significant expansion of resourcing. Police departments need to ensure that they have a fit and ready workforce, should an outbreak of the virus take hold within their ranks. Victoria Police suggest, on any given day, 10 to 40 police officers have to self-isolate due to close contact with infected persons. (Note the outbreak at Frankston Police Station in Victoria in mid-July which required larger numbers of police officers to self-isolate).

In addition to this police are still required to police a range of new lockdowns and social distancing laws as well as border restrictions in a variety of geographic areas and communities over this period (witness the New South Wales/Victoria border lockdown and more recently South Australia/Victoria tougher border restrictions). As restrictions tighten across states and territories the more police resources are required to supervise and strengthen these new changes. Again, VICPOL report that their COVID force is some 1,500 plus approximately 300 PSO's.

Resourcing issues were such a concern in Western Australia that WA Police reached out to try to attract retired officers to return to work voluntarily during the pandemic to assist. We understand that only three officers expressed any form of interest. The PFA vigorously opposes such a method being used during such a crisis.

Major cities and remote areas of the country have their own unique issues.

For example, in Sydney, 1,400 officers were required to police the quarantining of approximately 5,500 people in hotels across the city and this is being played out in other major capital cities across the country. (The PFA notes with interest the debate in Victoria regarding private security carrying out the function in that state and the subsequent second wave from some quarantine hotels. Police have now taken over that role). Whilst in

Queensland, not only did police have to guard and monitor hotels in Brisbane, but also Cairns, the Gold Coast and Townsville as well. Police were also required to monitor movements within the hotels, including access areas for smoking, medical checks, etc. Many police reported the lack of a consistent approach to movement protocols, including the fact many were not appropriately educated in proper procedures and protocols leading some to experience passive smoking exposure.

Police were also understandably required to deal with detainees' frustration, anxiety and anger resulting in officer stress and fatigue.

In regional and remote areas, similar resourcing issues have occurred. As mentioned earlier, there was a significant resourcing impact on remote indigenous communities where, for example, in Auruken, Palm Island and other remote indigenous communities in Queensland, police had been unable to leave for several months and in smaller stations with only a few police attached, fatigue management is an issue with officers being forced to work extended hours outside their normal operating hours.

Policing the borders has become a very resource intensive operation for some states. In remote areas of Queensland and Western Australia, in many locations, biosecurity officers, Australian Defence Force personnel, Australian Federal Police and state police were all in place. In Western Australia and Queensland issues of fatigue were raised. In Western Australia this was felt mainly amongst senior officers due to their not being paid overtime and required to work extended hours coordinating the Western Australian Police response to the pandemic. Also, in the Northern Territory, Australian Federal Police officers were required to work extraordinarily long hours and not afforded their normal industrial entitlements. Northern Territory Police report that since their borders opened on 17 July, they had nearly 20,000 entries into the Northern Territory.

Northern Territory Police reported in July that it is costing \$2 million a month to patrol the territories borders and ensure people comply with COVID-19 restrictions. Resource deployment is having to be prioritised with some services diminishing because of that<sup>1</sup>.

In QLD it is reportedly estimated that 1 in nearly every 10 police will be assigned to the Coronavirus pandemic response well into the foreseeable future. QLD State Disaster Coordinator and Deputy Commissioner Steve Gollschewski also reported in July this figure amounted to at least 9 percent of staff from all areas, across each region, allocated to the crisis duty<sup>2</sup>.

In Queensland border patrols between New South Wales and Queensland and Northern Territory and Queensland were established in both rural and established areas with main thoroughfares, with RBT style checkpoints, static road closures and roaming patrols in remote or regional areas. These were established very quickly. Whilst the main thoroughfare site reported safe working environments with adequate PPE and amenities,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-29/nt-police-jamie-chalker-on-coronavirus-border-restrictions/12501690?utm\\_source=abc\\_news&utm\\_medium=content\\_shared&utm\\_content=mail&utm\\_campaign=abc\\_news](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-29/nt-police-jamie-chalker-on-coronavirus-border-restrictions/12501690?utm_source=abc_news&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_content=mail&utm_campaign=abc_news)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-28/queensland-police-coronavirus-duty-self-nominate-9pc/12493046>

the same could not be said for a number of the more rural sites. The lack of workplace amenities as required under legislation included:

- Toilets;
- Showers;
- Protection from weather;
- Provision of meals; and
- Suitable facilities for sleeping.

It should be noted though, that with the assistance of the ADF and more permanent facilities being erected, many of these issues began to be addressed.

The recent closure of the border between Victoria and New South Wales saw ADF and New South Wales police working together here also. The closure required a large-scale operation to manage the 34 permanent checkpoints involving some 530 plus members along the 1,400 kilometre border. During the first fortnight, police facilitated the movement of 300,000 vehicles crossing from Victoria into New South Wales. Hundreds of officers were required to be deployed from outside of the border policing districts, some officers receiving less than 24 hours' notice to deploy.

Again, in Western Australia, where police are not covered by workers compensation, the Western Australia Government granted employees up to 20 days of COVID-19 Leave, however one of the provisions to access that leave, was that they had to have no remaining personal or sick leave entitlements. This disadvantaged members by forcing them to cut out their sick or personal leave before accessing this new entitlement. This issue was of particular importance for members working in the designated biosecurity zones of the Kimberley, East Pilbara and Ngaanyatjarraku. Travel to and from these areas is limited to essential purposes only, but many of those members stationed there, have families residing outside the zones (a similar situation to some of the remote areas in Queensland). Apart from dealing with the stresses of policing remote communities, police had the additional burden of being uncertain as to when they would be allowed to take leave outside the zones.

These issues were all taken up on a jurisdiction by jurisdiction basis, but collectively they had and are still having a significant impact on police resources. This is most evident in the August unprecedented state-wide lockdown of Victoria which has seen hundreds of police officers on the streets enforcing the strict restrictions to limit peoples' movement and activities to ensure the community stays safe.

### *Outsourcing*

The issue of outsourcing to private security, what most believed to be a police function, that is guarding people in quarantine hotels, has become a very topical issue in Victoria.

Many considered that people's safety, during a one in 100-year pandemic, being outsourced to private security, was a recipe for disaster. Those concerns have proved to be correct.



<https://theconversation.com/melbournes-hotel-quarantine-bungle-is-disappointing-but-not-surprising-it-was-overseen-by-a-flawed-security-industry-142044>

In other states, police had control of the overall operation, securing airports and taking control of hotel quarantine, with greater success.

### **Other Areas of Policing Potentially Impacted:**

Whilst the PFA has no formal confirmation, it is anticipated that the pandemic will potentially impact on a number of other areas of policing.

#### *Calls for a Police Reserve Force*

The recent bushfires and now the COVID 19 pandemic has reignited calls for the possible establishment of a Police Reserve Force, and we are aware of the AFP investigating such an arrangement for their jurisdiction.

While the suggestion might appear to have some merit, the PFA cautions any such move without the appropriate safeguards of appropriate practice standards and continuing professional development attached to any scheme.

Policing has begun to embrace a true professional model with the advent of higher education and the Police Practice Standards Model (PPSM), developed through the Australia New Zealand Council of the Police Profession (ANZCoP), on which the PFA sits. Any move to simply establish a Reserve Force without the underpinning of appropriate practice standards could jeopardise the standing of police in the wider community and thwart any future attempts for policing to gain full professional status.

#### *Recruiting*

Police Forces are taking extra precautions at their respective Police Academy's/Colleges. Whilst the pandemic is not expected to have a direct impact on recruit numbers, the additional precautionary measures that are required with on campus training are adding additional burdens in those areas.

#### *Training*

Anecdotal early evidence suggests that in field training is being affected due to the current impact on additional workloads and the difficulties in bringing police together at a location and undertaking any training that requires close officer contact.

## **The Pandemic's Impact on Community Attitudes Toward Police:**

There is no argument about the vitally important role that police are playing during the pandemic. While many other emergency services workers have been lavished with praise, and rightly so, at times, police have had many critics due to the role they had to perform.

Interestingly though, a recent report, *Political Trust and Democracy in Times of Coronavirus: Is Australia Still the Lucky Country – A Snapshot of the findings from a National Survey*, which surveyed confidence in key institutions across four countries, found that in Australia, the percentage of respondents who had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence was 75% for police. Only bettered by 78% for the Army and 77% for Health Services<sup>3</sup>. Bearing in mind some of the criticisms which have occurred with police policing pandemic laws against individuals, this is an outstanding result. Other similar surveys conducted by private pollsters during the same time, came up with similar results.

Earlier reports in Victoria suggested that more than 102,000 calls were received at the Police Assistance Line in April, compared to nearly 71,000 in March – a 30% jump. Victoria Police said that the assistance line and on-line reporting averaged 3,500 – 11,500 calls a day at the peak of the pandemic then, the vast majority relating to coronavirus breaches.

Duties such as closing and policing state borders, locking down whole suburbs and buildings, policing social distancing at protests, attendee numbers at funerals and weddings and issuing often unpopular infringement notices, put police in the spotlight and have attracted criticism from some elements of the community.

It is not uncommon that during times of protest, police are required to enforce unpopular laws. During the pandemic, whilst the vast majority of the public abided by the laws introduced by the federal and state/territory governments, police were also required to police a number of high profile and significantly important public spaces during the lockdown, including beaches and parks. The penalties police were legally obliged to impose were substantial in dollar terms. In the minds of the public the social distancing messages from government and the media were often confusing. This led to a number of negative stories in the media about police actions and as is often the case in these circumstances, protestors used their interactions with police to gain publicity for their own causes, at the expense of police.

Whilst the general perception from police on the front line is that the communities response to the unprecedented measures introduced have been positive, this has primarily been brought about by the way police have carried out their roles by educating the community and showing compassion and taking enforcement action, when and where necessary.

It is no coincidence, that during the pandemic, some community attitude surveys, taken after high profile police interventions, showed a slight drop in the public's attitude toward

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, M., Jennings, W, Stoker, G. and Valgarosson, V, (2020), Democracy 2025 Political Trust and Democracy in Times of Coronavirus: Is Australia Still the Lucky Country? A Snapshot of the Findings from a National Survey. Retrieved 21` July 2020 from <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Is%20Australia%20still%20the%20lucky%20country.pdf>

police performance. While the standing of police has remained very high throughout the pandemic, with the vast majority of citizens supporting police interactions, it appears coverage of some interactions, did have some minor impact on community attitudes.

Community attitudes toward police is very important long term from a community policing perspective, so it is imperative governments and the media ensure that police are supported in the roles that they are expected to perform. Long term, negativity of those roles by the public, can have a hangover affect well after such significant incidents have passed.

### **Impact on the Mental Health of Police and other First Responders:**

Discussion about the impact of COVID-19 on first responders cannot be had in isolation of discussions about its impact on their mental health and well-being.

Research shows that disasters and major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, pose significant mental health risks to police and the wider public. From a police specific perspective, exposure to communicable diseases, violent and traumatic events have long been identified as occupational hazards, of which continued exposure has a significant impact on their mental health.

It is well accepted, that police and other emergency services workers themselves, are at greater risk of experiencing a mental health condition than that of the wider community and mental health issues in the Australian Defence Force are already widely known and publicised. Issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, only exacerbate the problem for those frontline workers.

We encourage the Committee to avail themselves of the final Report of the 2018 Senate Education and Employment Committees Inquiry, into ‘The role of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments in addressing the high rates of mental health conditions experienced by first responders, emergency service workers and volunteers’

[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024252/toc\\_pdf/The\\_peoplebehind000mentalhealthofourfirstresponders.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024252/toc_pdf/The_peoplebehind000mentalhealthofourfirstresponders.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)

The findings and recommendations of that Committee are very insightful into the mental health and well-being issues confronting Australia’s first responders, many of which we argue, will have been heightened by the type of work they were required to perform during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the potential impact of their work on the mental health and well-being of their families and close friends.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**That the Committee support the efforts of Australia’s police associations/unions in highlighting the importance of the mental health and well-being of Australia’s first responders.**

## **Workers Compensation:**

As with the issue of the mental health and well-being of police and other first responders, discussions about the impact of COVID-19 on those workers cannot be had in isolation of how they are treated by the Workers Compensation processes.

Whilst at this stage, anecdotal evidence suggests there has not been a substantial rise in workers compensation claims by police as a result of the pandemic, it is important not to be complacent about officers being exposed to the virus and any other illness or injury as a result of their work.

One of the biggest fears for members and their families, was the worry about contracting the virus as a result of their work. The PFA is clearly of the view that if a police officer contracts the virus, then from a workers' compensation perspective, there should be a presumption that the virus was transmitted to the officer whilst they were on duty and therefore they should be automatically covered by work cover provisions. In other words, there should be a reverse onus of proof on the employer to prove that the virus was not contracted as a result of their duties.

Workers compensation is a stressful process at the best of times. It should not be made more stressful for someone who contracts the coronavirus.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**Where a police officer or other first responder acquires a virus that has been declared a pandemic, then the onus of proof that the transmission occurred whilst the officer was not on duty, should fall on the employer.**

**And further,**

**That the Committee support the development of a national standard of practice for dealing with workers compensation claims for all members of emergency services agencies who contract coronavirus including a presumption that they contracted the virus as a result of their work.**

## **The Creation of a Dedicated National Independent Service Provider Network:**

In view of the substantial second wave of contractions of the virus in Victoria and the role that Victorian Police are having to play and the additional stress that is being applied to them undertaking such roles, the planned creation of a dedicated National Independent Service Provider Network, being piloted in that state, should be given high priority.

The April 2019 Federal Budget contained a \$2.5 million grant to the PFA to work with the Police Association Victoria (TPAV) and the Australian Federal Police Association (AFPA) to

develop a 'BlueHub' support network. This network would be a dedicated independent service provider network, which would provide clear pathways for those seeking assistance with mental health injuries, with an emphasis on early intervention, accurate diagnosis and treatment.

A pilot centre of excellence is currently being established, to be complemented by satellite support services across Victoria, as part of the trial funded by the Federal Government, with a view to ultimately creating a national network to provide appropriate evidence-based services and treatment to the people who serve our community in high stress environments.

Given the geographical coverage required to meet the needs of our members, a national approach and funding was deemed to be the best option, piloted in Victoria, but ultimately being available in every jurisdiction, to allow for specialist psychiatric and alternative therapy services, including when members are acutely psychiatrically unwell or potentially suicidal.

The 'BlueHub' initiative will focus on the delivery of evidence-based treatments to members, in a timely manner that is both cost effective and has strong clinical governance.

The concept has been developed as acknowledgement that there is a current service delivery gap nationally where members present for treatment that is outside of the internally provided agency based psychological services or employee assistance programs. Police members are reluctant to engage with the public health system due in part to the delays in accessing accurate and reliable treatment options in a timely manner and the stigma around being forced to use the same facilities as members of the public that they may interact with in a professional capacity. The same stigma would apply to other arms of the emergency services. Significantly, of the members accessing PTSD treatments through the workers compensation system in Victoria, only 25% are receiving the recommended evidence-based treatment.

The current model of treatment seeking in most jurisdictions is heavily reliant on internal service provision and the use of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), which have been identified as having significant shortcomings.

Once established, 'BlueHub' services may be able to be expanded to other emergency services, both current serving and retired at a national level. By maintaining a central management oversight structure, clinical standards can be maintained, continuous improvement strategies can be implemented, and research opportunities can be identified and explored.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**We encourage the Committee to support the ‘BlueHub’ concept as outlined, as a preferred model of providing a best-practice clinical assessment framework, including research, training and development for mental health professionals to provide services to police and other emergency services personnel.**

### **Charles Sturt University Research proposal:**

Charles Sturt University has been successful in gaining a research grant to identify the nature and extent of work stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in first responders.

As part of the aims of the study, CSU will seek to measure levels of employee workplace distress and anxiety and then distil the characteristics of good crisis leadership.

The project will specifically investigate –

- The extent and type of stressors and the impact COVID-19 has on staff, particular those things staff found most difficult to cope with;
- What management support and leadership practices have been helpful, and what hasn't been helpful in coping with the new demands;
- What could the organisation do to better support staff in times of service disruption;
- What post-COVID support would be helpful; and
- The level of work stress, anxiety and psychological distress, using standardised, benchmarked measures.

It is anticipated that the report will be in final draft by the end of 2020.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**That the Committee reach out to the researchers undertaking the project at CSU to ascertain any relevance of the study's initial findings to this Inquiry.**

### **Education and Training of Public Safety First Responders:**

During the 2019/20 bushfire season, followed almost immediately by the COVID-19 pandemic, public safety agencies, including police, fire, emergency service and defence personnel, faced unprecedented challenges.

Interoperability is essential when public safety agencies are required to respond to such incidents across the country, however, such interoperability, is dependent on comprehensive and robust education and training systems to prepare our personnel to perform effectively and together in emergencies.

Public safety agencies, including police and defence, long ago recognised the importance of quality education and training and for over 20 years have demonstrated their commitment to building their workforce capability by the pursuit of professionalism and the development of national training packages, qualifications and competency standards, many of which complement one another. Through collaboration and sharing professional expertise and knowledge, these agencies have improved their understanding of each other's systems of work and have come together to share their education and training expertise and resources. This work has reaped benefits as was evident in the recent fires and COVID 19.

The Public Safety Industry Reference Committee (PSIRC) is the body through which public safety agencies collaborate in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. The PSIRC comprises employer and employee representatives responsible for the national training package qualifications for a range of public safety agencies, but particularly police and defence. The PSIRC also provides industry advice to the Australian Industry Skills Council (AISC) about public safety workforce capability needs. However, public safety agencies have identified a number of shortcomings in the system, that they are seeking to rectify.

A PSIRC style body does not exist in the Higher Education space, but the same interoperability and whole of Government capacity is vitally important across that sector as well. Such an arrangement would also assist in the professionalisation of policing/law enforcement/emergency response.

In the VET space, police, fire, emergency services, and defence have a decades long history of working collaboratively on behalf of public safety stakeholders and COVID 19 has again, particularly highlighted the importance of collaboration between police and defence training and education. It is in the best interest of the Australian community that the public safety sector continues this work together to build our national education and training and workforce capability.

This cooperative approach has enabled the public safety sector to anticipate future challenges and build a model for its education and training. This approach also supports governments and communities in preparing, responding to and recovering from major disasters and other catastrophic events.

Of particular importance to this sector, is the need to have agile systems of work that can respond rapidly in line with the unpredictable nature of many of the events confronted by the industry. A lesson learned in summer 2020, or via the COVID-19 pandemic, should be identified, a solution proposed and a change be in place in time for preparation for the next sudden event.

The 2019/20 bushfires and the pandemic, demonstrated how all the public safety stakeholders worked together collaboratively, demonstrating significant improvements over previous disasters and other unforeseen events. Many lessons have been learnt and the sector is keen to future proof national capability and train public safety responders to high standards.

However, as earlier eluded to, public safety agencies, representing public safety stakeholders have identified some shortcomings in the current arrangements within the VET sector, particularly as they apply to our industry.

For example, these agencies, are required to continue to make significant financial and in-kind contributions to the development of relevant training packages. These financial and in-kind contributions allow the public safety sector to develop and review national industry qualifications, skill sets and units of competency using subject matter expertise. The associated costs continue to grow, particularly as the complexity, breadth and depth of disasters and incidents grow exponentially. Funding to progress this increasingly demanding and crucial work is essential. However, under the current funding arrangements and the system under which the development of such products operate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to allocate scarce resources to this activity.

As funding for this development and review is only provided in the existing VET structure to Skill Service Organisations, agencies representing the public safety stakeholders are required to self-fund their own development and review work. This represents funds that would otherwise be budgeted to supporting frontline services but are now re-routed to agencies to undertake this work. Estimates suggest that this comes to **several million dollars annually**. It should be noted that this is just the development of the training packages and does not include the actual training cost incurred for delivering education and training to frontline personnel.

The public safety sector has for some time, questioned whether the current VET funding arrangements is as effective and efficient as it could be.

In policing, this work is undertaken by ANZPAA through the Australia New Zealand Council of Police Professionalisation (ANZCoPP), on which the PFA sits. All of this work is funded by the various police agencies and the PFA to ensure that our members have the skills and expertise to ensure that the Police Training Package is properly maintained. However, far more work on reviews and development could be achieved if federal funding for this work was applied.

Recent announcements by the Federal Government in the Higher Education space, by the use of University Programs linked to 'jobs' and the capability needs of the country, through a pool of Commonwealth Support Places (CSP) could assist to fill specific skills gaps or professional development within the police, public safety and emergency services agencies.

A number of undergraduate and post graduate Commonwealth Supported places, allocated on a needs basis to Universities, who can work with policing/public safety agencies to provide agreed educational programs, could have a direct impact on the professionalisation of those agencies.

A process, whereby relevant university courses could only be approved by national bodies representing those agencies, would guarantee appropriate collaboration to ensure they are supported and fit for purpose.



Our current concern is that the new CSP Discipline Bands, could place almost all law enforcement educational programs in very unattractive, high student fee, low return to university fee bands which will discourage both universities and officers taking up opportunities for further education. The provision of a pool of well-funded industry linked places would encourage police and public safety personnel to undertake professional development and improve the broader response capacity across agencies by encouraging personnel to engage in highly relevant, job related educational programs which could enhance the overall national response capability.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**That the Committee support public safety stakeholders through key identified agencies reviewing the current model of funding VET training package development with the view of identifying a better, fit for purpose model**

### **Further**

**That the Committee support an appropriate process, involving approved national bodies from the police, public safety and emergency services agencies, co-operating with the university sector, in the establishment of a pool of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) in the university sector, to encourage the filling of specific skills gaps and the continuing professional development of members of those agencies.**

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of Australia's Police. The PFA offers any further support to the Committee that you deem appropriate including appearing to give evidence if requested.

Sincerely yours

Scott Weber  
Chief Executive Officer  
07 August 2020