



**Police Federation
of Australia**
The National Voice of Policing

SUBMISSION to the

Environment and Communications References Committee

via – ec.sen@aph.gov.au

OPTUS NETWORK OUTAGE

The Police Federation of Australia (PFA) is the national body representing the professional and industrial interests of Australia’s more than 65,000 police officers, across all state, territory, and the federal police jurisdictions.

Membership as at: 31 December 2022	
Police Association of South Australia	4,703
Western Australia Police Union of Workers	6,880
Queensland Police Union of Employees	12,177
The Police Association of Victoria	17,424
Police Association of NSW	17,020
Police Association of Tasmania	1,415
Northern Territory Police Association	1,628
Australian Federal Police Association	4,040
Police Federation of Australia	65,287

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. Communications are a critical operational component for police and other emergency services. Loss of contact can be the difference between life and death in any incidents.

As you would likely be aware, there has not been an inquest or inquiry held in recent times where the issue of communications, within and between agencies, as well as by the wider community has not been raised as an issue of concern. This is particularly the case in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

The PFA has made numerous submissions and appeared before an array of Inquiries including over the past two years, the 2021 Regional Telecommunications review conducted by the Independent Review Secretariat of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, the Department of Home Affairs, Exposure Draft Security Legislation Amendment (Critical Infrastructure Protection) Bill 2022 and the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts Inquiry into Experience, Opportunities and Challenges for Co-investment in Multi-Carrier Regional Mobile Infrastructure. I respectfully suggest the Committee review those various inquires outcomes and recommendations as there may be a number of issues relevant to the Terms of Reference of current inquiry into the Optus Network Outage.

In respect this Inquiry, I wish to specifically draw on some of the issues the PFA raised in those Inquiries that I believe are specifically relevant to points 4 and 6 from the Inquiries Terms of Reference –

4. *the role of government in ensuring Australians have reliable access to telecommunications technology;*
6. *actions taken by the Federal Government and the Australian Communications and Media Authority on the day of the outage;*

As the Committee would derive from the PFA’s earlier submissions, we have been outspoken supporters of a government allocation of spectrum to allow the establishment of a Public Safety Mobile Broadband capability. The Committee may also be aware that recommendation 6.4 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements called for a nationally interoperable PSMB capability as a key priority for Australia’s future crisis management efforts.

“Australian, state and territory governments should expedite the delivery of a Public Safety Mobile Broadband capability”.¹

Until that recommendation is finally delivered, police and other emergency services heavily rely on telco providers for broadband capabilities. When those telco services fail, not only are the lives of Australia’s emergency services first responders put at risk, so are members of the Australian community who may be affected by an issue requiring emergency services.

The ability to maintain contact between front-line operations, supervisors and command centers is crucial in any operation, as it is for the community to be able to contact its emergency services. It ensures that –

- Front line officers’ and the community’s safety is paramount, and they know that help will be available if called upon;
- Operations remain appropriately coordinated; and
- Relevant information about an incident is able to be shared between the front line and the command center thus ensuring that all potential risks are mitigated.

¹ Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. (2020), Report, p172, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/>

Whilst I am not aware of any specific circumstances where that occurred during the Optus outage on 8 November, a telco outage of that nature and that duration could have catastrophic consequences.

The Committee may also note in previous submission of the PFA highlighted above, in particular the 2022 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts Inquiry into Experience, Opportunities and Challenges for Co-investment in Multi-Carrier Regional Mobile Infrastructure, the PFA's support for the concept of multi-carrier regional mobile communications infrastructure, with built in safeguards to ensure that telecommunications companies do not cut back on their investment on regional mobile infrastructure or attempt to get a 'free ride' from other telco customers' investments.

To that end, we note the very recent recommendation 23 from that Committee, that -

The Australian Government establish a working group involving state and territory governments, emergency services agencies, and mobile network operators to develop protocols for temporary roaming arrangements in declared disasters and emergencies.

We also supported the proposal to that Inquiry by the Centre for Disaster Management and Public Safety from the University of Melbourne, who the PFA has worked closely with over many years, for the concept of the identification of the key components of a mission critical communication eco system for public safety.

I would be happy to appear before the Committee to expand on any aspects of this submission.

Sincerely yours,

Scott Weber APM
Chief Executive Officer
17 November 2023