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Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) Submissions to the Inquiry into the Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022

About the Australian Paramedics Association (NSW)

The Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) ('APA (NSW)') is a registered Trade Union established in 2009. The Association represents the interests of Paramedics and Ambulance Support Staff employed within the NSW Public Sector. It represents the majority of Paramedics and Ambulance Support Personnel employed in New South Wales.

As working conditions have deteriorated for NSW Paramedics and Support Personnel in recent years, following the successive disasters of the 2019-20 Bushfire Season, the COVID-19 Pandemic and the recurrent 2022 flood events, the Australian Paramedics Association has advocated for significant workplace reform, higher wages and increased funding for regional and rural healthcare, to ensure the physical and psychological wellbeing of its members.

As the natural disasters which the *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* ('the Bill') envisions increase dramatically in frequency and severity, so too increases the desire of the membership of the Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) to see more robust protections established to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the NSW Paramedic workforce and their patients.

Introduction

Paramedics are at the frontline of the fight against Climate Change. When bushland burns, towns flood and cities choke under blankets of smoke, Paramedics are called upon to rescue patients from the most horrific of circumstances, at great and growing risk to their personal wellbeing and physical safety. So too are Paramedics called upon when Climate Change imperils the health of members of their communities in less obvious ways; when temperatures reach record highs and precipitate record numbers of heat-related illness callouts, or when lowered air quality heightens the risk of asthma attacks and laboured breathing.

For Paramedics, natural disasters do not begin and end in coastal towns drowned by unprecedented storm surges, or on roads congested with the cars of bushfire evacuees. Instead, this congestion follows them home to the hospitals where the work, as disaster patients flood the health system and existent understaffing, ramping and bed block issues become catastrophes of their own; frustrating the vital disaster relief efforts of Paramedics and severely jeopardising the capacity of their patients to be afforded treatment and achieve recovery.

Any Bill which contemplates these disasters is now necessarily also contemplating the workplace health and safety of Paramedics and their patients. The avoidance of future Climate Change induced catastrophes and the mitigation of their effects at all costs should be the highest priority of any Parliament interested in protecting the health and wellbeing of Australia's increasingly vulnerable communities and the Paramedics who serve them.

The Inadequacy of a \$200 million per annum Disaster Ready Fund

In early 2020, in the months immediately following the 2019-20 Bushfire Season. APA (NSW) conducted a survey of its membership regarding their experiences being deployed to treat bushfire survivors. 70% of respondents indicated that they did not believe that NSW Ambulance was ready to confront another significant bushfire disaster in the coming months or years. Almost a quarter of respondents also indicated that they felt pressured to abstain from taking leave over the summer period, including in order to defend their own properties or affect their own personal fire safety plans, so as to not place further strain on the Service's diminished operational capacity.

Ultimately, 45% of respondents rated the Service as having been either inadequately or severely inadequately staffed over the bushfire season in question. 53% of respondents rated the Service as having been either inadequately or severely inadequately equipped (including in its provision of essential medical supplies such as PPE and disaster safety management technology such as satellite phones) over the bushfire season, and 55% of respondents rated the Service as having been either inadequately or severely inadequately resourced in terms of its allocation of terrain-equipped emergency vehicles.

The costs faced by state Emergency Services in preparing for and responding to extreme weather events, like that of the 2019-20 summer, are many and varied. They may also be difficult to anticipate given the unprecedented severity of the natural disasters to which Paramedics are being asked to respond.

The Australian Paramedics Association is, however, confident in forecasting that the \$200 million per annum proposed to be allocated to the *Disaster Ready Fund per the Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* will be wildly inadequate to prepare Australian communities and Emergency Services for increasing disasters caused by Climate Change.

Data released by the Insurance Council of Australia in September this year noted that since 2005, Commonwealth expenditure on disaster relief has been approximately \$24 billion, while spending on disaster resilience was just \$500 million, a mere two percent of total expenditure. A report completed by the Climate Council in October 2021 found that, under a high emissions scenario, the costs of more frequent and severe natural disasters including bushfires, storms and floods could rise to as much as \$94 billion per year for Australia by 2060.

Assuming the Federal Government were to continue its pattern of spending just 2% of its total disaster relief expenditure on disaster resilience and risk reduction measures, such as those contemplated by the Disaster Ready Fund, it would still be required to pay some \$1.88 billion per annum by 2060 in order to mitigate the risk of the most severe consequences of Climate Change induced natural disasters to the level it has thus far. Even on this estimate, Disaster Ready Fund spending will need to be more than nine times greater than proposed by the *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* in order to meaningfully reduce the most severe risks associated with the natural disasters which will be faced by Australian communities and the Paramedics who serve them in the coming decades.

Additional investment in the Disaster Ready Fund represents extra Ambulances arriving to assist patients at the scene of a natural disaster, extra beds available for those patients at regional health centres, or even extra calls that needn't be made to Emergency Services because community members were equipped to survive a natural disaster before it even took place.

The Need to Acknowledge Climate Change

The members of the Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) intimately understand the reality of Climate Change, having witnessed its consequences firsthand and with increasing regularity over the past decade. The symptomatic presentation of victim-patients of natural disasters in the age of Climate Change is often distinct in its severity and complexity and should be acknowledged as such.

In order to adequately address the increased incidence of natural disasters Parliament must acknowledge the significant role of climate change in these worsening events. Resilience and risk reduction measures must be based on the best available evidence which currently indicates a significant increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters which is only going to grow.

Improving natural disaster resilience necessitates considering the role of climate change in worsening weather events in order to plan for the increased demands on Paramedics and the health system in the coming decades.

The Need for the Disaster Ready Fund to Anticipate the Worsening Effects of Climate Change and Increase Funding Commensurately

As the effects of Climate Change related natural disasters are anticipated to worsen over the coming decades, it is imperative that legislation which seeks to mitigate those effects be drafted in a manner which reflects this exacerbation.

The members of the Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) are intimately aware of the heightening expectations being placed upon them by the NSW Ambulance Service to respond to emergencies of growing severity both now and in the coming years. The online training modules which many of them were made to undertake in the lead up to the 2019-20 bushfire season and the various 2022 flood events were nominally intended to equip them to respond to patient calls originating from disaster contexts of unprecedented danger and complexity. These modules were widely criticised by the APA (NSW) membership as being inadequate for this lofty purpose and as foreshadowing just how alarmingly ill-equipped the Emergency Service for which they work was, is, and will, in coming years, be, to empower them to respond to natural disasters of which kind the *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* envisions.

Without the protection of disaster resilience funding increases commensurate with widely anticipated increases in severity and frequency of coming natural disasters, Paramedics will not be prepared to address these disasters. The Bill would be of greater benefit to Paramedics if it either directly allowed for increasing sums to be annually debited from the Disaster Ready Fund as the effects of Climate Change worsen, or if it included some mechanism by which the responsible Minister could increase Disaster Ready Funding as required by the evolving natural disaster landscape.

The Need for Dedicated Funding for Emergency Service Personnel, Training and Equipment as a Discrete Aspect of Disaster Readiness Funding

Paramedics would benefit greatly from specialised funding for Emergency Service personnel, training and equipment, which should be included as a discrete component of disaster readiness funding.

Following recent natural disasters in NSW, members of the Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) raised their concerns regarding their lack of access to necessary disaster survival equipment which severely impaired their ability to maintain their own physical safety and respond to patients in disaster zones. Such concerns included the non-provision of vital communications technologies such as radios and satellite phones which could continue operating where telecommunications infrastructure had been destroyed. One Paramedic, for instance, recalled using his personal mobile phone, in the absence of Service-provided disaster-specific communications technologies, to track the movement of nearby bushfires while treating patients during the 2019-20 summer bushfire season. Other concerns raised included that the ambulances Paramedics were required to drive during these disasters were not 4WD vehicles, and as such were incapable of traversing the damaged, debris-strewn roads and off-road terrain which were typical of the routes they were required to travel to attend to patients in disaster zones. Finally, some Paramedics even reported that they were not provided with sufficient personal safety gear, including fire blankets, smoke goggles and fire extinguishers, that would have allowed them to more successfully preserve their own physical wellbeing in such hostile environmental conditions.

Paramedics have also reported having been inadequately trained to respond to patients in conditions of natural disasters, with the brief online training modules they were made to undertake before being deployed to bushfire disaster zones in 2019-20 and flood disaster zones in 2022 having been of little value on the frontline of environmental catastrophe. Paramedics were asked to attend to patients presenting with symptoms unique to their particular emergency context and under environmental conditions grossly non-conducive to the provision of meaningful medical treatment.

Perhaps most significantly, members of APA (NSW) reported feeling completely overwhelmed by the sheer scale of patient need in disaster response and recovery contexts. Many Paramedics believed that the Emergency Services lacked the staff necessary to adequately address the crises with which they were confronted and emphasised that not only many more Paramedics, but also more Paramedics with specialised disaster recovery training as well as Extended Care and Intensive Care Paramedics, were required in order to meet the needs of disaster-affected communities.

Without dedicated funding intended to meet the needs of Emergency Service personnel, Paramedics and other Emergency Service workers will remain hamstrung in their ability to provide effective disaster relief. Paramedics must not be made continue operating at such great risk to their own personal safety. The *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* would be made much stronger if, by devoting specialised funding for Emergency Service responses to natural disasters, it acknowledged that any disaster-related risk reduction effort was only as strong as it allowed those charged with its frontline enactment to be.

Conclusion

The Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) is broadly supportive of the *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022*. Paramedics are intimately aware of the heightening risks of Climate Change induced natural disasters and are confident in their belief in the need for unprecedented levels of funding in order to prepare communities to survive, and recover from, these disasters.

That being said, it would be inappropriate to characterise the prevailing Paramedic view of the Bill as adequate to meet the needs of the communities and Emergency Service personnel with whom it purports to concern itself.

In order for the Bill to more meaningfully facilitate disaster resilience building, the Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) proposes the following changes be made to it;

1. The sum of money available to be debited from the Disaster Ready Fund annually should be increased to reflect the level of financing that will reasonably be required to prepare Australian communities for the natural disasters likely to befall them in coming years,
2. The total annual investment in the Disaster Ready Fund should be periodically reviewed so that it may be increased commensurately with the worsening effects of Climate Change such that the growing frequency and severity of natural disaster events does not outpace disaster resilience programs actionable by communities and Emergency Services, and,
3. The Disaster Ready Fund should include dedicated funding for increased and improved Emergency Service personnel, training and equipment as a discrete aspect of disaster resilience funding.

The Australian Paramedics Association (NSW) is grateful to the Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee for the opportunity to have made submission regarding the *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* and appreciates the Committee's time in considering the submissions made above.

The APA (NSW) is available at the Committee's convenience should it require further information.