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Context

My name is Mr Pat Jones and I am a firefighter with 30 years' experience. I would like to point out that the feelings and opinions expressed in this submission are mine and mine alone, I take full responsibility for them and am happy to talk to them if requested. These opinions are not those of my employer.

During my career I have responded to the 1994/95 Sydney bushfires, the 1997 Thredbo landslide, the 1999 Sydney hailstorm, the 2001 and 2003 Canberra bushfires and the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. I managed the deployment of firefighters to the 2009 Black Saturday fires and coordinated the return and burial of a firefighter killed as a result of those fires.

In my role as a firefighter, I have responded to and personally extricated 36 fatalities from various motor vehicle accidents and fire related deaths. I have also attended countless medical assistance incidents where I performed CPR and advanced medical support to patients. I do not know if those patients survived or recovered. As a senior fire officer, I have coordinated the response to and aftermath of 24 fatal incidents and have assisted the crews who responded to those incidents with support afterwards.

I feel that this brief synopsis of my career will highlight the nature and underlying causes of mental health conditions experienced by first responders. What we do is not a normal job, we are there to help those Australians who are having the worst or last days of their life and we do it because we care.

As a result of my experiences as described above, I feel that there is a national lack of specialised occupational mental health support and treatment services for first responders, and a lack of recognition for what we do day to day, despite the publicity we attract when a major incident that is newsworthy occurs. I will expand on how I feel these issues can be resolved further in this paper.

Employee assistance programs

The organisation I work for has a generic, off the shelf, one size fits all employment assistance program (EAP). It has been articulated to me in the past that there will not be a specific EAP for first responders as *"we are just public servants like everyone else"*. This is an area where I feel the Commonwealth, state and territory governments should unite and collaborate and have an Australian EAP for first responders, one that understands first responders, one that can support first responders, and one that is there to assist us 24/7/365. This would be a good step towards addressing the high rate of mental health conditions experienced by first responders.

The work of the committee to research identifying linkages between first responder occupations and the incidence of mental health conditions should be apparent when you talk to us about what we do. I apologise if this is confronting, but it is not a normal day at work when you have to pick up the brains of a deceased 15-year-old boy as a result of a motor vehicle accident and place them in a body bag with him. It is not a normal day when you try to rescue a victim from a fire and their skin falls off in your hands. It is not a normal day when you search for and remove the victim of a fire and see the horrific effects that fire has on a human body. This is our workplace.

The organisational structures that make whole of government decisions that result in how first responders are supported have never been confronted with these images and never will. Yet it is frustrating that across the country there is a continued push to try and overlay *"normal"* public service support mechanisms and ideologies onto a workplace that is significantly different to a 9 – 5 office job. The support a public servant working in an office requires is vastly different to the support a first responder needs. The workplace culture of first responders is different so you can survive, and this needs to be recognised and understood before trying to overlay generic mental health support practices onto our workforce.

I would recommend that more effort should be put by state and territory governments to recognise, respect and value the workplace cultures of first responders, and cease the ongoing efforts to make us just like every other public servant, because we are not.

Recognition

This is a vexed issue and a difficult one to get right as first responder workplace cultures and management practices do not support individual or group recognition. It is just not what we do. There are however activities and decisions that Commonwealth, state and territory governments can undertake to ensure appropriate recognition supports the positive mental health of first responders. I will however point out for that every first responder that supports recognition, there will be one that does not, so both sides of this argument should be taken into account.

National Emergency Medal

The first recommendation I would like to make is calling for a review of the National Emergency Medal (NEM) (<https://www.gg.gov.au/australian-honours-and-awards/national-emergency-medal>) and its criteria.

The 2009 Victoria bushfires had the following criteria for awarding of the NEM.

- service must be in the protection of lives and property, or in the service of interests, that are not their own, in direct response to the emergency, including support that enables or facilitates the emergency response;

- the geographical area is the State of Victoria;
- the qualifying period begins on 28 January 2009 and ends on 5 March 2009; and
- the minimum duration of service that a person is required to have completed to qualify for sustained service is:
 - paid service on 14 days, including at least two days in the period beginning on 7 February 2009 and ending on 14 February 2009; or
 - unpaid service on 7 days, including at least one day in the period beginning on 7 February 2009 and ending on 14 February 2009.

The service I work for sent 80 firefighters in support of these fires and had 8 support staff who enabled and facilitated the emergency response into Victoria between 28 January 2009 and 5 March 2009 (and beyond). Only one of these first responders was awarded the NEM and that is because he was killed whilst fighting the fires, and even this recognition was not automatic and had to be applied for and considered by the NEM committee.

Of these first responders, their deployments ranged between 1 four-day rotation and 3 four-day rotations, interspersed with returning to their home jurisdiction to staff fire stations here due to our territory facing the same fire conditions. Of the 8 support staff, the majority worked over 30 days straight without a break. This commitment was never recognised.

Volunteer agencies from the same jurisdiction had 78 members awarded the NEM for the same work.

The difference between the services according to the NEM committee (given they were on the same trucks, fighting the same fires, in the same location and from the same jurisdiction) was that one service was a career service, the other a volunteer service.

I am sure if the committee delved deeply into this example, they would find that a vast number of volunteers who were awarded the NEM were on paid emergency leave supported by their employers. In this context, I fail to see the difference between someone who is given paid emergency leave by their employer to be a volunteer, and someone whose source of income is derived by responding to fires and other emergencies. We are doing the same job.

I would recommend that the NEM be reviewed and that in the future, the criteria for awarding of the medal does not differentiate between paid and unpaid service. A review of past practices would also be welcomed.

National Medal

In August 2014, a submission was made to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (attached) seeking an amendment to the regulations for the National Medal. This amendment was aimed at bringing the National Medal in line with the Australian Defence Medal, the National Police Medal and the Australian Operational Service Medal – Civilian whereby if a first responder was killed in the line of duty and had not met the eligibility criteria for awarding of the National Medal, a Chief Officer could nominate them and it would be accepted.

I fail to see why a first responder would not be automatically recognised by the nation with a medal if they lost their life during operations, when an ADF member, a Police Officer and a Defence Civilian support member are (and rightly so).

The journey working with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has been slow and frustrating, with the only action after nearly 4 years so far being a survey of Chief Officers to

seek their views. I understand that the area is busy which can be seen by the number of determinations to regulations made in relation to the Australian honours and awards system (<http://gg.gov.au/australian-honours-and-awards/newamendments-regulations-determinations>), however a lack of communications and support is evident.

I would recommend that the committee review why first responders are not eligible for the National Medal if that person died as a result of service with an approved organisation.

National memorial

Considerable work was put into developing a national memorial for first responders who were killed as a result of their chosen vocation. I would encourage the committee to note that the outcomes of this work has substantially contributed and enhanced mental health support for the first responder community.

Initially an online portal was developed that recognised all first responder line of duty deaths. This was achieved in conjunction with the National Arboretum and can be found at https://www.nationalarboretum.act.gov.au/about_us/partnerships/fireandrescue

The second part of this work has been the development of a honour wall at the National Emergency Services Memorial <https://www.nca.gov.au/attraction/national-emergency-services-memorial> This will be achieved in May this year.

I would recommend that the Commonwealth Government supports the memorial wall at the National Emergency Services Memorial with the same level of commitment, funding and respect that is provided to Australian service men and women.

Summary

I would like to applaud the committee for taking on this review. First responders do a job that not everyone wants to do, but it needs to be done. We make Australia a safer and better place, but this comes at a personal cost. I hope my recommendations are taken seriously and considered as part of your review.

18/4/18

Mr Pat Jones AFSM FiFireE

Recommendations

1. The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should unite and collaborate and have an Australian EAP for first responders.
2. More effort should be put by state and territory governments to recognise, respect and value the workplace cultures of first responders, and cease the ongoing efforts to make us just like every other public servant.
3. It is recommended that the National Emergency Medal criteria be reviewed and that in the future, the criteria for awarding of the medal does not differentiate between paid and unpaid service. A review of past practices would also be appreciated.
4. A review should be undertaken into past practices of awarding the National Emergency Medal.
5. That the committee review why first responders are not eligible for the National Medal if that person died as a result of service with an approved organisation.
6. That the committee notes that the outcomes of work to develop a national memorial has substantially contributed and enhanced mental health support for the first responder community.
7. That the Commonwealth Government supports the memorial wall at the National Emergency Services Memorial with the same level of commitment, funding and respect that is provided to Australian service men and women.

Attachment 1

Mr Peter Rush

Assistant Secretary

Honours, Symbols and Territories Branch

Prime Minister and Cabinet

PO Box6500

Canberra ACT 2600

Friday, 1 August 2014

Dear Mr Rush

I am seeking your support to put forward an amendment to the *National Medal Regulations 2011* to remediate what I and others see as a significant problem with the current procedures.

Under the current regulations and more broadly the current Australian Honours and Awards system, a member of a service organisation as defined by the regulations, who is killed in the line of duty, receives no recognition for service to their nation.

I would draw your attention to two significant recognition sites for fire and police members who have died in the line of duty:

- Fire services http://www.nationalarboretum.act.gov.au/about_us/fireandrescue
- Police <http://www.npm.org.au/>

I am unsure how many of the post 1975 deaths listed on these honour rolls would have been awarded the National Medal and how many would not have been eligible due to not meeting eligibility requirements, but it would be a worthy study to undertake.

This oversight could be simply remedied by adding the following clause to part 5 section 14 of the current regulations:

(d) It has been determined by the chief officer of the approved organisation that

(i) a person died while a member of an approved organisation

(ii) the person has not met the criteria of (a) (i) and (ii)

(iii) in the opinion of the chief officer, the person died as a result of service with an approved organisation.

I am confident from my initial investigations and discussions that you would get considerable support from approved organisations and their industrial bodies for this amendment.

I am basing my recommendation on real life experiences as I lived through the ordeal of supporting the family of a firefighter who died in the line of duty.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this proposed amendment with you, and to develop a plan to seek the support of all approved organisations affected under the National Medal Regulations.

Please feel free to contact me on any of the contact details shown below.

Regards

Pat Jones AFSM FIFireE