

I write to you as an ex NSW police officer of 12 years. I commenced duties in Sydney in 2002 and was medically discharged in 2014.

I spent 3 years in a country location during this time.

I've thought many times over the last 4 years what changes could have prevented or lessened the chance of me being in the situation I am. The situation being deemed Totally Permanently Disabled due to PTSD as a result of my time as a first responder.

I have copied the terms of reference and, if I may, will address each in turn.

A) The nature and underlying causes of mental health conditions experienced by first responders, emergency service workers and volunteers.

I can't speak for other first responders but for me, as a police officer, there were several.

i) I think the core reason most people become police is to help people. That purpose is rotted away over time and I suspect this desire to help people and the lack of this apparently occurring has a deep impact on police with that core value. The issue is that police care.

ii) Police attend multiple incidents a shift which will or may not, on a sliding scale, require evidence to be given in court at a later date. Time is rarely available for the purpose of making copious notes that the officer could use to make a statement at a later date and the result is the officer must remember the details. Instead of being able to get the information out of one's head onto paper it remains in place, playing over and over lest one forget.

iii) Expectations result in feelings of unfairness. The expectation that if someone assaults you, they will be punished. The expectation that if you have a large workload you'll be given time to address it. The expectation that you'll be supported when things get rough. Feelings of disillusionment, questioning your own value and self worth and feelings of abandonment.

B) research identifying linkages between first responder and emergency service occupations, and the incidence of mental health conditions

As police you get to experience the raw emotion of the incident. You are overwhelmed with stimuli and must be able to make the right decisions. You get to see, hear, feel and smell the chaos again and again and in ways most people never will. Over exposure to traumatic incidents without an effective and efficient outlet.

C) management of mental health conditions in first responder and emergency services organisations, factors that may impede adequate management of mental health within the workplace and opportunities for improvement, including:

i) reporting of mental health conditions.

I am a strong advocate of this. My experience has been that police generally deny they have a problem, for reasons I don't understand, and blame it on other aspects of their lives. I think police mental health needs to be monitored.

ii) specialised occupational mental health support and treatment services.

I've wished that each Command area had a clinical psychologist trained specially in PTSD, depression and other related conditions. They would monitor staff by way of watching staff's behaviour, being aware of sick leave, sit in on complaints (as the officer's behaviour is likely a symptom) and assess referrals by staff. I advised my Supervisor of my concerns for a fellow officer who was behaving very oddly. The supervisor asked the officer if they were ok and when they said they were, gave me the thumbs up. The officer had watched a person burn to death in a pool of fuel and watched until the fire brigade put the fire out some 15 minutes later. The officer was never the same happy person again.

I would like to see emergency services personnel get 12 free psychologist appointments a year as a requirement for employment.

iii) workers' compensation,
No comment.

iv) workplace culture and management practices,
This was a big deal. I was never supported. I was given a brochure to call when I broke down and they weren't helpful. They didn't understand what I needed and I had no idea what was going on.

v) occupational function and return-to-work arrangements,
My return to work was very pushy, was not understanding of my issues and exacerbated my condition.

I can't spend any more time on this. It is extremely draining and my anxiety is very high.

Kind regards

Matt Ray