



Committee Secretary  
Senate Education and Employment Committees  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

21 May 2018

Dear Secretary

### **Inquiry into the mental health of first responders**

I refer to an email from Mr Stephen Palethorpe, Secretary, dated 6 April 2018, inviting a submission to the current Senate Inquiry into the mental health of first responders.

On 13 October 2016, I published a performance audit titled *Preventing and managing worker injuries*. This audit assessed how well the NSW Police Force and Fire & Rescue NSW prevent worker injuries and manage the return to work of injured workers. The audit considered both physical and psychological injuries to workers.

The report made a number of findings that may be of interest to the Committee's current Inquiry.

1. The NSW Police Force is reviewing and updating its mental health resilience training for new recruits and existing staff (pp. 9, 10).
2. The NSW Police Force has expanded its range of services to prevent mental health injuries. These include peer support, mandated psychological assessments for specialist officers and a trial of an online psychological check (p. 11).
3. The NSW Police Force is improving its data collection on officers' exposure to incidents. The intent of this is to ensure support is offered and limit cumulative exposure to incidents (p. 11).
4. The NSW Police Force is communicating to medical practitioners the range of safe duties available for officers with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to recover at work (p. 13).
5. The NSW Police Force has effective structures for management to discuss and identify return to work options for staff. This aims to reduce the need to medically discharge officers (p. 14).
6. Fire & Rescue NSW uses peer support officers to deliver mental health education sessions. These aim to improve mental health literacy, decrease stigma and improve knowledge of support services (p. 22).
7. Fire & Rescue NSW has recently introduced evidence-based programs to promote mental health awareness and resilience. These programs are being independently evaluated (p. 23).
8. Fire & Rescue NSW provides structured interventions to crews who have attended a critical incident. Peer support officers deliver the interventions and refer to professional counselling where needed. Firefighters talked positively about their experiences with this program (p. 25).

9. Fire & Rescue NSW promotes early diagnosis and return to work for psychological injuries. In consultation with a mental health organisation and a university, it has developed a guide for firefighters with post-traumatic stress disorder (p. 28).
10. Fire & Rescue NSW has reduced the number of workers compensation claims for psychological injuries from around 60 in 2010–11 to around 25 in 2015–16 (p. 31).

I have attached a copy of the full report for your consideration. Should you require further information, please contact Claudia Migotto, Assistant Auditor-General, Performance Audit

Yours sincerely

Margaret Crawford  
Auditor-General of NSW