

Additional Estimates Hearing – Feb 2017

Commissioner Opening Statement

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The high level of operational demand did not lessen over the Christmas and holiday period and the AFP has continued to see great operational successes throughout the last few months.

Last December, the Victorian Joint Counter Terrorism Team successfully stopped an alleged imminent terrorist attack on Australian soil, putting four people before the court and potentially stopping an unimaginable amount of damage from occurring in the Melbourne CBD. Additionally, since November, the AFP has been involved in operations with our partners that have resulted in the seizure of almost three tonnes of cocaine, approximately one tonne of methamphetamine and crystal methamphetamine, and more than 300 kilograms of pseudoephedrine.

The level of cooperation we have with our partner agencies has never been higher. This includes the ongoing liaison with international policing partners as we continue our efforts to combat off-shore organised crime impacting upon Australia. Chair - It has now been six months since the AFP publicly released its Cultural Change Report, following an independent review conducted by Elizabeth Broderick and her team.

The report detailed behaviours and attitudes that I am not proud of - but I am at pains to stress that the report also found that the “vast majority of members are deeply committed to the organisation, are passionate about their work, and keen to see the AFP succeed into the future.”

When my executive team and I made the decision to address these cultural issues we did so knowing that it would be a difficult task. We did so also knowing that we were putting additional pressure on the agency and its members. Putting another aspect of our agency under increased scrutiny beyond that typically applied through our various oversight and scrutiny mechanisms.

And while we stand by this decision I want to put on the record my absolute and unwavering confidence in the members of the AFP who contribute so directly to the safety and security of Australia and only wish to do their job to the best of their abilities. The AFP is not defined by the report or allegations of individual behaviours; we are defined by our responses to the challenges that confront us and by our efforts to continue to improve, and we are defined by our role in the protection of Australia.

When working with Ms Broderick, she advised us not to rush to implementation, but to take time to listen, absorb and act with our organisation's long-term goals in mind. Agencies like the AFP do not change overnight – or simply because I say so. The AFP is currently in the process of implementing all 24 recommendations from the report. 7 of the 24 recommendations and sub recommendations have been completed – and all other are being progressed. Positive changes are emerging.

A new “Reform, Culture and Standards” portfolio was established immediately following the report's release, solely to focus on supporting the reform. We have aligned the AFP's Confidant Network, Professional Standards area and Diversity Networks under this portfolio, to allow stronger collaboration and support of new reform initiatives as they are implemented.

A key recommendation was the establishment of the AFP Safe Place team, a new area that designed to provide holistic support and advice to people experiencing harmful workplace behaviour like sexual harassment, assaults and bullying, so they feel respected, in control and safe to talk. Safe Place is available to former and current AFP members, who are encouraged to bring matters to the team, even if they have already reported through previously existing processes. In its first six months, Safe Place has received approximately 180 referrals, with 16% of these referrals relating to allegations of a sexual nature. 48% relate to bullying, and 34% deal with a range of administrative, procedural, and psychological issues.

These figures are the result of an increase in the number of referrals since the opening of Safe Place and initial reporting. This shows that the reforms are working and that our employees have an increased confidence in the system to come forward.

It is positive that to date, almost half (78 cases) of the matters referred to Safe Place have been resolved to the users' satisfaction. The remainder are still ongoing. While we still do have a way to go, the AFP leadership group is committed to making improvements in line with the recommended changes and I strongly believe that the organisation is taking positive steps in the right direction.

At this point I would like to address the specific matter of mental health and emphasise that the health and wellbeing of my staff continues to be of the absolute highest priority to me, the organisation and to my senior executive.

Police agencies are a microcosm of the societies they serve and, as such, an agency like the AFP with over 6000 staff is going to reflect in some fashion, the same mental health challenges and personal experiences that occur in wider society. It is also widely acknowledged that police are at a higher risk of trauma-caused mental injury than almost any other profession.

All AFP staff currently have access to a number of support systems, including a 24 hour Employee Assistance Program and an internal team of psychologists, nurses, chaplains and work safety professionals. Our records show that these services are being utilised by AFP members. There are positive examples of current serving members who have suffered from mental health concerns, including PTSD, who, through the support they have received, have been able to return to full-time work and continue their career pathways.

But, I am also aware that there are some past and present members who believe we can do better in our mental health support services and that there would appear to be a range of experiences in this area. And I and my executive team, agree we can always do better. As part of ongoing work to improve support services to staff, late last year, the AFP restructured its wellbeing services and appointed a respected clinician in charge of the national function, as our Chief Medical Officer (CMO).

The CMO has oversight of the soon to be released *AFP Mental Health Framework and Action Plan*, a recently revised framework that recognises the essential role of mental health for achieving a healthy and safe AFP workforce. A framework that will improve our ability to respond to our current and future challenges in the area of mental health. A priority task is to ensure our mental health strategies, including those captured under this Framework, are world's best practice and, in addition to having the AFP's mental health strategy peer-reviewed we are also engaging an independent expert body, Pheonix Australia, to do a final review prior to release.

I expect that it will interest the Committee to know that the ANAO has initiated an audit into the AFP's management of mental health and Mr Wood, my Chief Operating Officer has the entry interview with them tomorrow morning. I am keen to work with the ANAO and draw upon their findings to continue to improve the AFP's approaches to mental health. I understand that this audit is consistent with audits being conducted nationally of police response to mental health.

I am very conscious that the work my staff do every single day can be extremely challenging and I have never underestimated or overlooked this. These issues are areas that we can always do more on, and we have been working with independent practitioners and industry experts to ensure the best support is available for our members.

I am happy to speak about this further if needed.

I, along with my Deputies, would be happy to now take any questions from the Committee.