



[Beyond Blue 2020, 'A summary of the three phases of Beyond Blue's research examining mental health and wellbeing in Australia's police and emergency services sector', FBG Group Ltd for Beyond Blue, November 2020](#)

Police and Emergency Services Study Phase 1:

Was a qualitative narrative project that explored the mental health experiences of current and former police and emergency services personnel and their families. Their experiences highlighted the significant effect that police and emergency services work can have on mental health, with both positive and negative outcomes. Working in the sector provides many workers with a strong sense of purpose and social connection. Conversely, this research also emphasised that, in addition to occupational trauma, poor workplace culture and practices can have a particularly damaging effect on the mental health of police and emergency services personnel.

Police and Emergency Services Study Phase 2:

Surveyed more than 21,000 current and former police and emergency services employees and volunteers from 33 police and emergency services agencies across Australia between October 2017 and March 2018. Findings published in November 2018 in the report 'Answering the Call':

- Confirmed phase 1 find that that mental health issues were more prevalent amongst the police and emergency services workforce than in the general population.
- Further established that poor workplace culture and practices were just as damaging to mental health as occupational trauma.
- The survey also found that the likelihood of poor mental health increased with length of service and that self-stigma, awareness of negative workers' compensation experiences and the perception that asking for help was a sign of weakness were barriers to timely support-seeking amongst affected police and emergency services personnel.
- Answering the call also found that building a strong social network of family and friends outside of work, enhancing sleep quality and increasing physical activity is likely to help support and improve mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.
- The overarching recommendation for government I was to adopt a nationally coordinated policy approach to police and emergency services mental health and wellbeing. This approach should address four action areas: adequate funding for agency mental health programs, best practice interventions and practices, workers' compensation reform and support for former employees¹.

¹ Several of these recommendations were consistent with the recommended actions in the Australian Government's response to the Senate inquiry into first responder mental health - February 2020. These include its commitment to a Commonwealth-led national action plan on first responder mental health and in-principle support for workers' compensation reform.



- Re recommendations for agencies - to develop or enhance formal workplace mental health and wellbeing strategies and to address the confidential findings unique to their agency. Phase three was designed to support this rec. and translate knowledge into action.

Police and Emergency Services Study Phase 3:

Agency Support

Between July 2019 and March 2020, Beyond Blue provided 33 police and emergency services agencies across the nation tailored support from strategic wellbeing specialists at no cost. The engagements provided additional support for agencies to reflect on their specific results and design, review, implement or update a strategy that addresses their unique mental health and wellbeing needs.

Beyond Blue found that most police and emergency services agencies' approaches to workplace mental health and wellbeing were broadly comparable to other sectors, with the maturity of agency approaches varying based on a range of enablers and barriers outlined in this report. A handful of agencies are forging ahead, with leading-practice strategies either in place or near finalisation.

Research

This phase studies the agencies helped, to look at how challenges common to many workplaces present in the police and emergency services sector. These include issues around stigma, leadership, role clarity and funding for proactive health and wellbeing approaches.

Other challenges evident amongst the Phase 3 participants are unique or heightened in relation to police and emergency services work, such as monitoring trauma exposure, critical incident debriefing, shift frequency/length, alternative duties and reaching volunteer and remote personnel.

Recommendations

All agencies be encouraged, empowered, and equipped to:

- design and implement a mental health and wellbeing strategy that is executive-endorsed, follows the 'Protect-Promote-Support' model, is evidence informed, uses psychosocial risk assessments to prioritise actions and includes proactive strategies and actions as well as reactive supports.
- integrate coordinators of mental health and wellbeing work with related areas of the business, including Human Resources, Occupational Health and Safety, Learning and Development and Return to Work personnel.
- support and help retain health and wellbeing personnel through encouraging internal and external knowledge sharing, developing succession and sustainability plans and avoiding single-point dependencies.



- establish business cases that demonstrate the long-term benefits of investing in proactive mental health and wellbeing strategies.
- develop communication and engagement strategies that promote deeper engagement across the organisation, particularly from executive leaders.
- promote understanding of a strategic approach to mental health and wellbeing.
- prioritise people-leadership skills, both in general and with specific regard to psychological safety.
- ensure mental health and wellbeing training is tailored to specific cohorts.
- develop multifaceted approaches to mitigating suicide risk.
- maintain awareness of contemporary research on the effectiveness of existing programs and services, including the current evidence around psychological debriefing following critical incidents.
- integrate datasets, consider realistic and effective benchmarking measures, and evaluate strategies and approaches against leading practice.
- identify meaningful alternative duties for staff affected by mental health conditions.

Conclusion

We are confident that, working together, agencies, governments, unions, peak bodies and serving and retired personnel and their families will continue to make a difference.