

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUPPORTING THOSE WHO SUPPORT YOU:

The Experiences of Emergency Service Workers' Families



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## The Problem

There has been a growing awareness in recent years amongst Victoria's emergency management leaders of the role families and significant others have in enabling and supporting emergency service workers to flourish and perform at their best. As a sector we have never asked family members how emergency service work affects family life.

This is important because emergency service workers are regularly exposed to trauma and the incidence of mental ill health far exceeds the general population. According to research only 1 in 5 first responders seek and receive adequate help for a mental health condition. When people don't seek help, their mental health usually declines. This is challenging for families and significant others at home living with and supporting those with undiagnosed and untreated mental ill-health.

The purpose of this project was to deepen ESFs understanding about the positive and negative impact on families of emergency service work and to learn from lived experience what could be done to support families and their loved ones who serve our community. This work will inform ESF's future program development.

## What We Did

To deepen understanding of the topic we undertook desk top research and 25 online interviews with family members of Victorian emergency service workers. They had family members involved with the Victoria Police, CFA, Ambulance Victoria and VicSES.

The conversations with family members explored the themes of mental health and wellbeing, positive impacts of the role, negative impacts of the role, support provided to families, ideas for improving support to families.

This was a limited study but nevertheless has produced some important preliminary findings.

## What we found

From the desk top research we found:

- Although there is plenty of research on emergency service workers, very little research has been conducted directly on the families of emergency service workers
- Emergency service workers are at very high risks for physical and mental injuries, and families/spouses of people with physical or mental health problems are burdened with more responsibilities and their quality of life and mental health suffer
- When workers leave for extended periods of time (e.g., to fight bushfires), their spouses and children experience stress that can impact them long-term

Key references used were:

- Varker, T., Metcalf, O., Forbes, D., Chisolm, K., Harvey, S., Van Hooff, M., McFarlane, A., Bryant, R., & Phelps, A. J. (2018). Research into Australian emergency services personnel mental health and wellbeing: An evidence map. *The Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry*, 52(2), 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867417738054>
- Morman, M. T., Schrodt, P., & Adamson, A. (2020). Firefighters' job stress and the (un)intended consequences of relational quality with spouses and firefighter friends. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 37(4), 1092–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519886355>
- Miller, L. (2007). Police families: Stresses, syndromes, and solutions. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 35(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926180600698541>

From the interviews we found there were many positives that came from living with an emergency service worker:

- pride in the worker: *"I have so much respect for my parents...because they put their lives on the line every single day"*
- respect for emergency service work: *"I'm sorry I'm so emotional, but I think it's that when you're living with it, you really get to understand the enormity of it."*
- increased self-reliance and independence: *"We're self-dependent and self-reliant now"*
- broadened their perceptions: *"We have a much better perspective on the world"*
- increased capabilities and confidence in emergency situations: *"I was able to call the police without any worry and take control of the situation because I remembered everything my husband had told me in his stories"*

There were also many negatives:

- excessive or unpredictable time commitments through rostering, being on call, or volunteer hours piled on top of a full time job: *"I remember being frustrated as hell that at family functions, Christmas birthdays, any special time that I had driven over an hour to see my mum and she would rush out the door when that pager went off leaving us all there without her. I hated it, I felt like it was more important than we were."*
- worry when the worker is away: *"There were times when [dad] was away, fighting fires that had burned for weeks on end... just not seeing him much, that was the stressful time"*
- worry over the worker's safety: *"I remember now, when I was about 8 years old, that every time my dad didn't come home from a shift on time, I had convinced myself that he was dead, and that I didn't have a father anymore... I would stay up until 2, 3 in the morning waiting for him"*
- feeling responsible for the worker's mental health: *"I feel very responsible for keeping an eye on his mental health... his parents will always be on the phone to me, saying 'look after him, look after him,' and it's this whole big burden, that I'm the one who has to do it all"*
- feeling guilty when they were unequipped to help the worker, such as when they are dealing with PTSD: *"I couldn't help [mum], I couldn't fix her... it made me feel really guilty about myself and really anxious"*
- conflicts with social life: *"We won't get included in some sorts of things"*

This digital story summarises the findings of our conversations with family members: [The Experiences of Emergency Service Families](#)

## What we recommend

From this study we make the following recommendations to inform the development of support for families of Victoria's emergency service workers.

- Provide more resources for the families including advice on where to get support if required
- Provide education for families who want to prepare themselves to support a family member in the emergency services by learning about things like how to look for and recognise the signs of mental illness
- Improve the visibility of the successes and struggles that families face so that families feel less alone, and the sector is more aware of their stories and perspectives
- Consider the needs of children and how emergency service work can impact them negatively and provide appropriate resources aimed at children developed in consultation with experts such as child psychologists