



Mental Health Showcase - 4th October

The Emergency Services Foundation recently hosted a second Mental Health Showcase event, which brought together 180 staff and volunteers with an interest in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the 139,000 people working across Victoria's emergency service sector. Designed by people within the sector, this bespoke event provided the opportunity for attendees to learn from experts and leading practitioners, as well as network with key stakeholders and likeminded colleagues from 15 emergency service agencies.

ESF's CEO, Siusan MacKenzie, opened the event with a reflection on her recent visit to Canada highlighting a recent study of 1,100 firefighters in British Columbia which paradoxically found that peers are less likely to reach out for help.

Amanda Leck, Executive Director, Strategy and Capability at Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) spoke of EMV's support for the event and ESF's upstream work to improve mental health outcomes.

The morning sessions were led by a range of experts in the field: Nicole Sadler from [Phoenix Australia](#) facilitated a discussion with Hayden Frick ([Steople](#)), Grant Chisnall ([Left of Boom](#)) and Lenore Wambeek ([Gallagher Bassett](#)) on whether, 'Resilience is a concept that does more harm than good'. Panellists and attendees agreed that while resilience is a complex term, it is suitable for mental health discussions if individuals are supported and encouraged to heal in a manner that works for them, and on their own timeline.

Kate Connors (Chair ESF Mental Health Advisory Group), David Lawrence (University of WA, and author of [Answering the Call](#)), Sophie Barrett (Senior manager VACU Wellbeing & Support Services Ambulance Victoria) then discussed Beyond Blue's 2018 'Answering the Call' research into the mental health of emergency service personnel, deliberating what has changed, and what is required next in terms of data collection. They emphasised the need for data to inform the creation of new programs and resources, and ensure contributors see tangible results to help

overcome survey fatigue. Participants identified through a Menti poll areas they thought where data was lacking.

Dale McQualter from [Maddocks](#) reflected on how Work Design can impact psychological safety with Judy Chi, a Senior Research Officer at the [Future of Work Institute](#), Curtin University. The discussion noted how work design is too often neglected as a strategy and elements such as good leadership, managerial transparency, a supportive team, and role clarity can assist mental health. Judy presented a SMART model of work design which includes mitigating illness, preventing harm and the promotion of thriving which resonated with participants.

In the afternoon, participants chose from one of three streams. The first was about emerging issues in the emergency services sector; Jane Gilmore ([Safe Steps](#)) talked about the negative relationship between workplace performance and family violence. She discussed strategies for sensitively dealing with employees as victim survivors and possible perpetrators. Angela Harbinson ([The Separation Guide](#)) outlined the impact on the workplace of separation and divorce trauma, noting that the sector has a very high rate of such relationship issues and how this can impact performance over an extended period. ESF 2023 Scholarship recipient Peter Romanis from the Victoria Police Major Collision Investigation Unit shared his study experience and preliminary findings on how compassion fatigue can impact a people in a range of emergency service roles.

The second afternoon stream was for peer coordinators, facilitated by Todd Wehr ([Queensland Ambulance Service](#)). He led a lively discussion on a range of topics including; how recruitment can be used to build credibility and reputation of the program; what aspects of agency refresher training can be shared and developed and; how agencies today utilise and support their peers, compared to ten years ago, when peers focused on supporting people post-critical incident. Participants left with a framework of issues to reflect on.

The third stream, facilitated by Jo Hood ([Tolycab](#)), used an ESF Knowledge Digest which analysed the benefits of peer support to guide discussion on how peers can improve their practices. Conversation was highly animated, as participants were open and keen to share their vast experience and tips. This group particularly enjoyed the opportunity to meet and speak with people from other agencies.

The final session of the day saw Tim Peck ([Phoenix Australia](#)) use his own lived experience with mental ill health as a Victoria Police detective to demonstrate how valuable learning can be drawn from people such as him. He was joined by Matthew Richman ([Tasmania Police](#)), who presented how his organisation has shared stories of lived experience to great advantage, emphasising the essential contribution of senior leadership as program advocates.

In closing, four participants reflected on the day and each highlighted the benefit of bringing like-minded people from the sector together to network and be exposed to experts and new ideas. A thorough evaluation of participant feedback is underway.

RESPONSES

I was really impressed to see so many people coming together from across the sector in Victoria eager to embrace the challenge of mental wellbeing. I am not aware of any event like this anywhere else in Australia.

Professor David Lawrence, Curtin University

This has been an event in which the people who are here have been participants to the full extent. We had a great morning of presentations and speeches, and everybody engaging in a participative way through those, not just from people being spoken to.

Tony Pearce, Inspector General for Emergency Management

It's been an interesting day down here with this forum. It's one of those things where we've learned a lot, listened to a lot of stuff, a lot of good ideas. And I'll be quite happy to come back to this one again.

Barry Faid, CFA

I really, really loved the sessions on compassion fatigue and on the impact of family violence on the emergency services sector. Really, really engaging, really exciting presenters.

Georgia Gardner, EMV

Overview of the Mental Health Showcase event