



Residential Wellbeing Program Pilot underway

After several years of careful planning the first ESF Residential Wellbeing Program pilot is now complete. Eight participants including six men and two women from six different agencies worked with mental health counsellors familiar with the emergency services environment over four days on the Mornington Peninsula. In total six pilot programs will be held before the end of the year involving different cohort groups.

A comprehensive evaluation will be undertaken by Phoenix Australia to review how the program impacts individuals, families, and workplaces. In conjunction with this, a cost benefit analysis will be reviewed.

Rationale for the Program

A gap was identified in the availability of early intervention options for Victorian emergency service workers. After considerable research ESF's initiative was based on a program created in British Columbia for firefighters and police. The Residential Wellbeing Program was developed by ESF to help fill the gap in early intervention options understanding that it will not suit everyone, but it has the potential to be enormously beneficial on many levels. There are some points of difference to the Canadian program, namely the engagement of significant others because it is recognised that participants need a support crew when they get home. ESF will also more formally seek to understand how the program impacts culture in the workplace.

No programs exist that provide the same sort of tailor-made intensive early intervention to help emergency service workers in the orange zone on the mental health continuum to avoid the risk of more serious mental injury.

Program facilitator Dr Shannon Hood saw the Canadian program in action last November with a cohort of Vancouver police. After facilitating ESF's first program he said, "It was a great privilege to do facilitate the first ESF RWP in Australia. In spite of being from different agencies, the participants found common ground and provided great support for each other. I have no doubt the benefits will extend beyond their time together and into their families and organisations."

The second program facilitator Sharon Craig said, "It was an absolute privilege to be part of the first pilot Emergency Services Foundation Residential Wellbeing Program with Victorian first responders who make such a wonderful contribution to our communities. Thank you and gratitude to all the contributors who made this special program possible."

Purpose of the Pilot

The purpose of establishing a Residential Wellbeing Pilot Program for Victorian emergency service workers is to:

- Assist serving emergency workers to understand the mechanisms and effects of operational stress on the body, the brain, on behaviour and on relationships.
- Provide opportunity to discuss the impact of personal emergency response experiences with peers in a systemic and professionally facilitated environment.
- To equip participants with skills for self-regulation, effective communication, and planning strategies to maintain their resilience while facing ongoing operational challenges.
- To help minimise progression to serious mental injury and WorkCover claims.
- To demonstrate through evaluation the benefit of such an early intervention initiative for participants, families, and organisations.

Special thanks to The Cape Home Hotel for hosting us, and for funding support provided

by [Tony's Trek 2023](#), WorkSafe, EML Group, Motorola Solutions Foundation, and the Victorian State Government Emergency Responder Mental Health Program.

As participants prepared to leave the first program, they reflected on the experience of the last four days:

"It has been so pivotal for me as an individual, a husband, a dad and a manager to attend this pilot. I see this as a huge game changer for first responders and their families moving forward. Thank you."

"Gratitude, for being a part of such an impactful program, and moreover for the group of people who are phenomenal humans and the connections I made. The frameworks, exercises and support have given me so much to work with, take home and share. Thank you for the opportunity, it's set me up to thrive in the future."

"A sense of great privilege that I was able to participate in the program. It is a unique experience, defined by connection, sharing, caring, and new friendship. The safe space to share experiences is real, and extremely well managed by the extraordinary counsellors."

"I learnt how I am not alone or isolated, and how important it is to take the time, make the time to look after oneself and family. I came to the realisation that shedding insecurities is nothing to be ashamed of. We all connect in more ways than we would think possible. Be honest, be open, listen, reflect and connect."

[**Read more about the Residential Wellbeing Program**](#)