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Impacts of family breakdown on the Emergency Services workforce

Separation is rarely simple or easy, especially for Emergency Service (ES) workers who face additional challenges due to the stressful nature of their roles and shift work. Other factors such as high rates of PTSD and family violence lead to protracted timelines for reaching agreements which often places employees under high stress for 3-5 years. This has a costly ripple effect on the workplace and the communities they serve.

After Angel Harbinson, the founder and CEO of The Separation Guide, spoke at the Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) Mental Health Showcase in October 2023 about the workplace cost of separation, ESF partnered with The Separation Guide to understand the effects of separation on ES workers and the support they need. This aligns with ESF's 2024 focus on addressing gaps in knowledge surrounding emergency service families and their mental health.

Despite growing awareness of mental health in the workplace, separation and divorce remain stigmatised, leaving individuals feeling isolated. Recognising and addressing these issues is crucial to support ES workers effectively and reduce economic and safety risks for workplaces and the community.

The data showed several risk factors: over 70.7% going through separation reported being

physically present at work but not entirely focused, 58.7% found it hard to concentrate and make decisions, emotional regulation was a struggle for almost 50%, and 40% found it more challenging to cope with job pressures. These factors represent a high risk for employee health, wellbeing, and public safety.

Participants highlighted the need for holistic support addressing emotional, financial, legal, and parenting needs to navigate separation successfully. The survey showed a 229% increase in ES workers experiencing a mental fitness score in the “red zone” while dealing with separation, a risk zone for severe anxiety, depression, and potential thoughts of suicide or self-harm. The report made various recommendations for the sector to consider.

Angela Harbinson emphasised, “We know relationship breakdown often triggers societal issues like suicide, substance abuse, family violence, and homelessness. We aim to prevent people from reaching the red zone on the mental health continuum by providing early intervention support to de-escalate stress and channel them into pathways that reduce cost, conflict, and confusion.

Research shows that early intervention and workplace support lead to better outcomes, reducing the impact on individuals, their families, workplaces, the health system, and other government services. Therefore, a ‘whole of sector’ approach is recommended to address this societal problem as it impacts emergency service workers and their employers.

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“Emergency services work can be challenging, and strong social support is critical for long-term, healthy careers. Family support plays an important role, and disruption and loss of support through separation and divorce can have wide ranging impacts on mental health and wellbeing. This study highlights the prevalence and impact of separation on emergency services personnel and the importance of supporting people through major life upheavals such as relationship separation.”

David Lawrence, Professor of Mental Health at Curtin University and member of the ESF Mental Health Advisory Group

“The separation support report provides critical insight into a subject and impact that touches so many of our workers but until now has not been focused on. This provides the opportunity for us to better understand and support our people.”

Emma Atkins, General Manager – People, Life Saving Victoria

“Great presentation from Angela, just shows how factors outside of work can impact not only individuals but entire teams. The Benefits of Separation Support Services for Emergency Services Workers presentation highlights another crucial way to raise awareness and better support people going through separation.”

Peter V Cantarella, Health and Wellbeing Adviser, DEECA