



First Responder Sleep Recovery

Shiftwork requires individuals to attempt to sleep at biologically inappropriate times of the day. Although most people can obtain some sleep this disruption is known to affect the health and wellbeing of many people who work night shifts which includes a vast number of our firefighters, paramedics, police and 000 call takers. Volunteers and their families are equally affected by sleep disruption associated with nighttime call outs.

According to the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine, in a study of almost 7000 firefighters, nearly 40% of Firefighters suffer from at least one of the following sleep disorders: insomnia, work shift disorder or sleep apnea.

Laura K. Barger, author of this sleep study discovered that firefighters with sleep disorders were more likely to report and seek treatment for cardiovascular disease, depression, diabetes, and anxiety. The findings of this research demonstrate the impact of common sleep disorders on firefighter health and safety and show a connection to the two leading causes of death among firefighters. Unfortunately, of those found to suffer from a sleep disorder, 80%

of these firefighters had no prior awareness of their disorder.

The studies released by the Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Sleep Medicine and Research suggest that sleep loss (less than 7 consecutive hours per night) may have wide-ranging effects on the cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and nervous systems.

FRV Acting Commander Matthew Nicholson was the recipient of a 2024 ESF Scholarship supported by Rotary, which enabled him to learn more about this problem. He travelled to the USA to learn from experts at the First Responder Sleep Program in Colorado and recently shared his learnings with people from across the sector at a train the trainer session in Melbourne attended by representatives from FRV, AV, VicPol, SES, 000Vic, Forest Fire Management and Wildlife Vic.



The session provided an overview of training and resources which can be applied within agencies to help address the known negative mental and physical health consequences of sleep disruption/deprivation.

Matt explained that sleep is not a luxury. It is a form of emotional first aid. He said, “Good sleep patterns are essential for the physical and mental regulation that is so important for the sort of work that first responders do that involves sharp decision making often in high stress environments.”

Matt’s scholarship report identified that sleep disruption experienced by first responders affects, and is affected by, family life. His report recommends that sleep awareness and recovery programs must be inclusive of emergency service personnel’s families. To that end ESF is working with Matt to add a section on sleep to its [Guide for Families of Emergency Service Workers](#).

Other recommendations in his report address the condition of sleep environments, and awareness and education about how agencies can assist first responders to better manage the disruption on sleep of night shifts volunteer call outs. Participants at the event made suggestions for what information would be most useful for them to share amongst colleagues. ESF will collaborate with its member agencies to compile and provide this.

The full findings and recommendations of Matt’s report can be viewed [here](#).

Applications for the [2025 ESF scholarships](#) supported by Rotary close on 17 November.

RESPONSES

"Matt Nicholson's investigation on the impact of sleep disturbance on emergency personnel will benefit employees and volunteers within the emergency services sector. We know that quality sleep is an essential part of wellbeing, and more importantly, this presentation highlights the dangerous impact of shift work, and sleep deprivation – even in small amounts – for people, the families of our people included. Understanding sleep hygiene is no longer enough – we must listen to these investigations and generate real change across our emergency service businesses to help protect our people from harm, both physical and psychological."

- Dr Megan Dobbie - AV

"It was very insightful to hear about the science and emotional healing that happens during our sleep given how important this is due to the nature and hours of the work we do. We are already having conversations as to how to put a spotlight on this at Triple Zero Victoria."

- Stacey Robinson - Triple Zero Vic

"What we heard underlines what is going on in all agencies. SES people are under the same pressures. The use of a sleep diary would be a good tool to help people keep track of their sleep habits and normalise the information."

- Stuart Riddel - SES

"Matt highlighted the importance of sleep as a contributing factor to ill-health at similar levels as products of combustion. Moving forward we will include sleep education and access to resources as part of our education when we visit stations."

- Matthew Charlwood - FRV

"What a bank of knowledge Matt was. I walked away with a toolbelt filled with knowledge surrounding sleep, the ramifications should it be lacking and strategies to put in place to improve sleep hygiene and mental health overall. This was a highly beneficial presentation and should be available in foundation training for all emergency service responders. I not only look forward to passing on this vital information to my colleagues, but also personally implementing the tools learnt into my daily routine...especially Yoga Nidra!

- Tash O'Brien - VicPol