



## **Mental Health Showcase 2024**

The 2024 Mental Health Showcase brought together 147 people from across the emergency management sector, including peers, volunteers, heads of agencies, managers, and others with an interest in supporting Victorian emergency service staff and volunteers.

The Showcase is a key event for the sector, as it is specifically for the Victorian emergency services, and issues of relevance to them. In this constantly changing environment, this event provided a unique opportunity to be exposed to subject matter experts, learn from each other, and share wisdom.

Through the Victorian Government's Emergency Responder Mental Health Program, ESF was able to offer 55 funded places for sector volunteers, and accommodation for 40 regional volunteers. This event was also supported by WorkSafe Victoria.

The first speaker of the day was WorkSafe's Director, Mental Health Strategy and Coordination, John Moran, presenting on work design and reminding attendees of the importance of consulting with employees in implementing good work design.



Enterprise Professor Nicole Sadler (ESF Director and CEO Phoenix Australia) spoke about prevention, and what it actually means in terms of emergency management and mental health: “Even in occupations such as emergency services work, where people can be regularly exposed to difficult and often traumatic tasks, there are things we can do to prevent or reduce the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of workers. This includes training and support for individuals and leaders, as well as improving work practices and culture.”

Cristine Green (Gallagher Bassett) spoke in the context of work cover compensation, and noted that people have a 63% better return-to-work-outcome if they are contacted within 72 hours after an incident.

Reverend Dr Mark Layson (Charles Sturt University, Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy NSW and NSW Ambulance), and Jesse Winter, (Chaplain, FRV) spoke to participants about Moral Injury - “the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioural and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (Litz et al., 2009) - and how we can broaden the lens on mental injury. They noted the importance of “switching from fixing the worker, to fixing the work.” The Work Health and Safety reports brought up by Reverend Dr Mark Layson can be accessed [here](#).



As an increasingly important presence in all fields of work and life, the following presentation on AI provided opportunity to debate its relevance, ethics, and implementation in the emergency services sector. Dr Simon D’Alfonso (School of Computing and Information Systems at the University of Melbourne) and Dr Rahul Khanna (Co-Director of Transforming Trauma Victoria, Phoenix Australia) opened this topical conversation, emphasising the importance of considering working with AI, rather

than against. As Dr Simon D'Alfonso summarised, "AI won't replace humans, humans using AI will replace humans not using AI."

There's always something new happening in the emergency services sector, and the Emerging Issues panels provided an opportunity to raise new ideas and debate their efficacy in the field. The first Emerging issues panel was facilitated by Prof. David Lawrence (Curtin University). On the panel, Dr Kevin Lutz (Wounded Warriors), who resides in Canada joined attendees through video to speak about Dealing with Addictions. He stated that "social engagement is one of the most significant predictions of people doing well following a harmful event."

Jim Jung (Victoria Police Chaplain) considered whether there is a place for a spiritual dimension to the MH continuum, and concluded that a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model would provide space for this underacknowledged facet. David Younger (Clinical & Consultant Psychologist) spoke about transformative hope as the new resilience. The key takeaway from his discussion was that hope in terms of having confident expectations about the future is extremely important for facing the challenges of emergency service work, and more broadly the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.



The second Emerging Issues Panel was facilitated by Associate Professor Lisa Dell (Phoenix Australia). Dr Richard Chambers asked, "What about the trauma we bring into the job?", and contextualised trauma within the context of the Residential Wellbeing Program. Richard said that peers and managers can help with reducing the negative effects of cumulative trauma by being proactive in providing support, providing space for connected storytelling, and referring where necessary.

Alex Walkow (Monash University School of Psychological Sciences Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health) spoke about the impact of shift and emergency work on sleep and mental health. He said employers and organisations can help mitigate the harmful effects that shift work has on sleep by setting conditions, leading by example & encouraging healthy sleep habits. Matthew Nicholson (FRV) recently completed an ESF Scholarship Supported by Rotary on sleep, and his report can be accessed [here](#).

Sophie Todorov (Victoria Police) and Ross Sargeant (SafeSteps) introduced a pilot Family Violence Network for emergency service workers, with the intention of supporting those who support others, safely sharing lived experience, and encouraging better mental health for individuals and workplaces. Register your interest in the network [here](#).

A powerful end to the day came from Belinda Neil (Fearless board member and former NSW Police Inspector), who spoke of her lived experience, the impacts of work on her mental health, and her path to recovery.

## RESPONSES

“Another great MH Showcase event! Thank you for arranging such a diverse and interesting range of guest speakers and topics. It was so wonderful to hear Dr Chambers acknowledge the work our Triple Zero Victoria call takers and dispatchers do and the challenges experienced in those roles. His presentation about the trauma we bring into the job was really insightful. So affirming to see a room full of people from the sector all wanting to do more. I am always in awe of the lived experience speakers sharing the story about their mental health recovering journey.”

**– Stacey Robinson, Triple Zero Victoria Peer support and Wellbeing Lead.**

“The opportunity to connect with other agencies, hear the latest research and see what’s happening in our Victorian space is so important. Thank you ESF for another informative and inspiring event!”

**– Lisa Dell, Phoenix Australia**

“The entire ESF Showcase was informative and captivating from start to finish. Presenters highlighted real, current issues and facilitated discussions about practical solutions to improve mental health outcomes.”

**– Tammy Alhalaby, Senior Mental Injury Specialist EML**