

## Project Overview

University students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts were hosted by the Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) to complete a research project. This team of students was tasked to create a sector-wide view of mental health programs.

The primary objectives of this project were to:

- a. To create a whole sector understanding of what ESF member agencies are prioritizing and doing in the prevention and early intervention space.
- b. To express the sector's approach to MH prevention and early intervention diagrammatically.
- c. To create a baseline for future reference and continuous improvement
- d. To identify opportunities to share ideas and prevent reinventing the wheel.
- e. To see what, if any, gaps are revealed.

They conducted interviews with wellbeing managers from 13 of ESF's 15 member organizations to understand existing mental health programs and strategies. Additionally, they interviewed experts in mental health including people from WorkSafe, Future of Work Institute, and Phoenix Australia to gain insights into best practices and areas of improvement. The data gathered was analyzed to identify priorities, gaps, and strengths in mental health plans.

## Findings

Ten of the most commonly used programs across organizations were identified. These included peer support, chaplaincy, Employee Assistance Program, leadership training, after deployment check-ins, in-house clinical psychologists, family programs, training/online learning programs, advertisement and recognition programs. The most used framework, which provides structure and guidance as organizations develop their mental health programs, was [Beyond Blue's Good Practice framework](#). This framework was developed in collaboration with the Victorian Emergency Services sector in follow up to the *Answering the Call* research. It is widely recognized, if not utilized. The programs delivered in organizations were categorized based on where they sat in the three pillars of the Good Practice Framework: *support, protection and promotion*.

*Protection* and *support* focus on preventing mental injuries and intervening after they have occurred. Their research revealed that programs emphasizing *protection* and *support* were relatively well-developed and widely implemented across the sector. Much of the focus went into these categories, as many organizations cited them as strategic priorities of their mental health plans.

On the other hand, the *promotion* of mental health, which focuses on maintaining and improving good mental health, was significantly underdeveloped. Only 1 of the 10 programs sat in this pillar. There was limited focus in this category, and no organization described it as a strategic priority. This revealed a gap across the sector and opportunity for improvement in relation to how organizations' prioritise activities to promote mental health and wellbeing.

Through an interview with Professor Karina Jorritsma, a lead developer of the [Thrive at Work framework](#), the importance of promotion to maintain a workplace where workers and volunteers

can thrive was discovered. This framework puts a focus on a *promoting thriving* pillar. The *Thrive at Work* framework defines thriving as 'being energised, feeling valued, and feeling that what you do is valued... being productive, being open to challenges presented, and having the opportunity to continuously learn and grow' (Thrive at Work, 2021). Being in a thriving state can make workers feel more fulfilled and recover quicker from work demands. Workers and volunteers that are given opportunities to improve their mental health at all stages are better equipped to handle the mental and physical rigors of their roles.

## Recommendations

To address the identified gap, it was recommended to increase focus on promotion, particularly with attention on promoting thriving in the workplace. It was recommended to refer to Future of Work's [Thrive at Work framework](#). The *Thrive at Work* framework provides strategies to not only mitigate illness and prevent harm but also foster thriving. It can help organizations evaluate the maturity of their plans with data-backed metrics available with its [Assessment Tool](#). It can also provide more guidance on leveraging already implemented programs to achieve better outcomes. The *Thrive at Work* framework provides insight into the area where the sector is currently underdeveloped and could see great benefit.

## The Students' Development

A helpful mnemonic, C.A.R.E, is suggested by the students as a tool for mental health teams when forming programs that promote thriving.

1. **Connection:** Foster trust and personal ties between leaders and their teams to enhance workplace connections.
2. **Acknowledgement:** Develop systems for peer and community acknowledgment of workers' contributions to boost morale and appreciation through awards and recognitions.
3. **Relationships:** Promote social bonding between peers and create a stronger relationship with family.
4. **Empowerment:** Create opportunities for employees to take ownership of their career and role, providing a feeling of self-sufficiency and growth through work.