

ESF IMPACT

newsletter

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Thriving Needs More Attention – Findings of an ESF Study

For a number of years, ESF has partnered with [Worcester Polytechnic Institute \(WPI\)](#), a university in Massachusetts, USA to host third-year students undertaking an Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) research project as part of its [Melbourne Project Centre](#).

The S.T.E.M University aims to broaden students' academic experience through the IQP, and give them real-world, hands-on, global experience before graduating.

Their data shows that this IQP experience is life-changing, and that it matters to employers.

In undertaking projects sponsored by local organizations in and around Melbourne, WPI students learn to understand new cultures, apply and adapt their technical knowledge, manage complex projects, work with diverse partners, and innovate in ways that meet real community needs.

Hosting the WPI students is always a highlight in ESF's calendar, and their research projects help build the evidence to inform ESF's work.

Don't wait for the wheels to fall off



The 2024 team, Leala Carbonneau, Abigail Henry, Mia Franciso, and Jake Burke, were no exception, and after prior research, interviews, and in-depth investigation, they were able to give ESF a sector-wide view of Victorian emergency services mental well-being programs. The team grounded their recent presentation, in a simple, but effective, car analogy (pictured above). The students pointed out that whilst we would take a car, or indeed one of our service vehicles, to the mechanic at the initial sign of a problem, all too often those in emergency services do not get the same support to maintain their wellbeing.

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

To investigate this, they conducted semi-structured interviews with wellbeing managers from the ESF's member organizations, to understand existing mental health programs and strategies. They also interviewed experts in mental health to gain insights into best practices and areas of improvement. The gathered data was analysed to identify trends, gaps, and strengths in mental health initiatives. Programs were categorized based on their focus on support, protection, or promotion, and evaluated using a five-point scale to assess their development and level of attention.

The WPI team's extensive research revealed that programs emphasizing protection and support, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), post-incident check-ins, training/online resources, and advertisement were relatively well-developed and widely implemented across the sector. On the other hand, the promotion of mental health, which focuses on fostering positive mental fitness and thriving workplace cultures, was significantly underdeveloped. Most organizations lacked structured programs targeting the promotion pillar as identified in the THRIVE at work framework developed by the Future of Work Institute at Curtin University, with limited efforts in areas like social connection, recognition, and empowerment.

As such, they recommend that to address these gaps, agencies should increase focus on the promotion sector, particularly through attention on promoting thriving in the workplace with reference to the [Thrive at Work framework](#).

The team also developed a handy C.A.R.E. acronym, for mental health teams to use as a tool when forming programs that promote thriving.

1. **Connection:** Encourage team-building activities and foster trust within leadership to enhance workplace connections.
2. **Acknowledgement:** Develop systems for peer and community acknowledgment of workers' contributions to boost morale and appreciation.
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 mental health and career through meetings that provide guidance on their role and value in the organization.

The WPI student's full final report, and a recording of their presentation, can be found [here](#).

Responses and discussion

During their final presentation, Jake, Leala, Mia, and Abigail were able to share and discuss their findings with mental health experts and senior agency representatives.

Jody Kelly, Wildlife Victoria, asked the team what they found most surprising during their research, to which they answered that despite their research showing the importance of peer support, their interviews with agency representatives showed this was not as widespread as they expected.

Richard Reilly, McGarry House, asked what they found from a financial perspective. The students explained that whilst a lot of agency funds were being directed towards mental health initiatives within the intervention and prevention space, promotion and future-facing programs were largely underfunded.

Karina Jorritsma, as developer of Thrive at Work, noted that the C.A.R.E. acronym nicely captured the intersection of family and community, and the importance connection and acknowledgment that sits around her focus on work design as a key foundation of psychological safety.

Michael Morgan, FRV, found that the students' findings resonated with challenges he has found with awareness and stigma, within his agency. He agreed that agencies too often focus on what's going wrong, rather than acknowledging good performance and efforts. Michael and the students also discussed difficulties getting this information to families, a topic which is of great interest to ESF. You can read more about this via our [Family Matters webpage](#).

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