Bridging the Gap:
The Impact of Operational Demands on the Families of Emergency Service Workers

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Meet the Team

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WPI 2

Imagine this…

9NEWS — Mallacoota, VIC

Credit: Lee Shepheard/Elyssa Nelson

"I think I cried nearly every day for the first week because it was fairly shocking. He's sending me photos of a whole forest that's on fire. And then I started thinking, Oh my God, what if my husband dies doing this job? He's so brand new to it, he doesn't have the skills yet. He's out there, I'm here. I couldn't talk to him. Like it was actually really stressful."

Within Victoria in 2024/2025:

2260 Victorian ESWs were deployed

(State Control Centre)

Extended Family

Children

Partners

2,260 ESWs
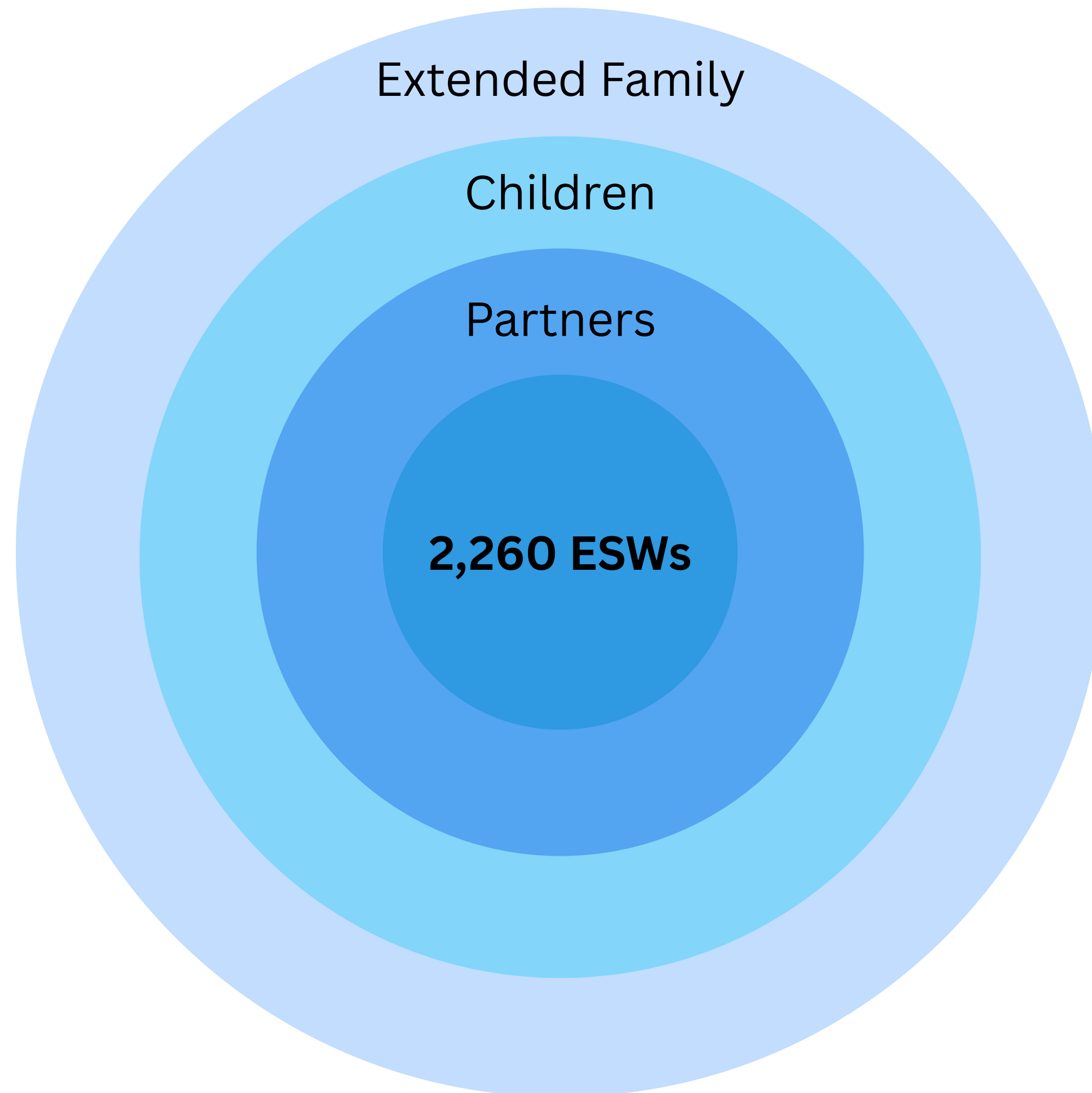
Scale of Deployments

In Australia and New Zealand in 2024/2025, **1672** emergency service workers were deployed interstate **(5-7 days),** and **352** were deployed internationally **(Minimum 36 days)** (AFAC).

Now think about how many families are impacted.

Agenda

> Goal and Objectives for the project

> Background Research

> What we learned from Agency Interviews

> What we learned from Family Interviews

> Recommendations

> Key Takeaways

Goal

Support families of emergency workers' mental health before, during, and after deployments to further pillar four of ESF's Family Matters strategy.

Objective 1

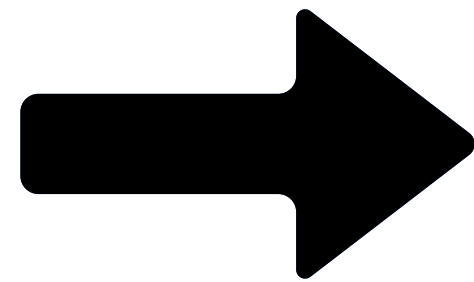Determine the nature of deployments and assess **current agency support practices**

Objective 2

Ascertain **needs of families** before, during, and after deployment and what **support methods** are helpful

Objective 3

Provide **recommendations** to guide sector-wide support practices.

Project Inputs →

8 Weeks of Literature Review and Background Research

Interviews with well-being leaders at 6 ESF member agencies

Interviews with 20 family members of ESWs

Interviews with 10 ESWs themselves

Background Research

Emergency Workers Face Unique Challenges in Their Line of Work

1 in 3 Australian ESWs experience **high or very high psychological distress** compared to the 1 in 8 among all adults in Australia
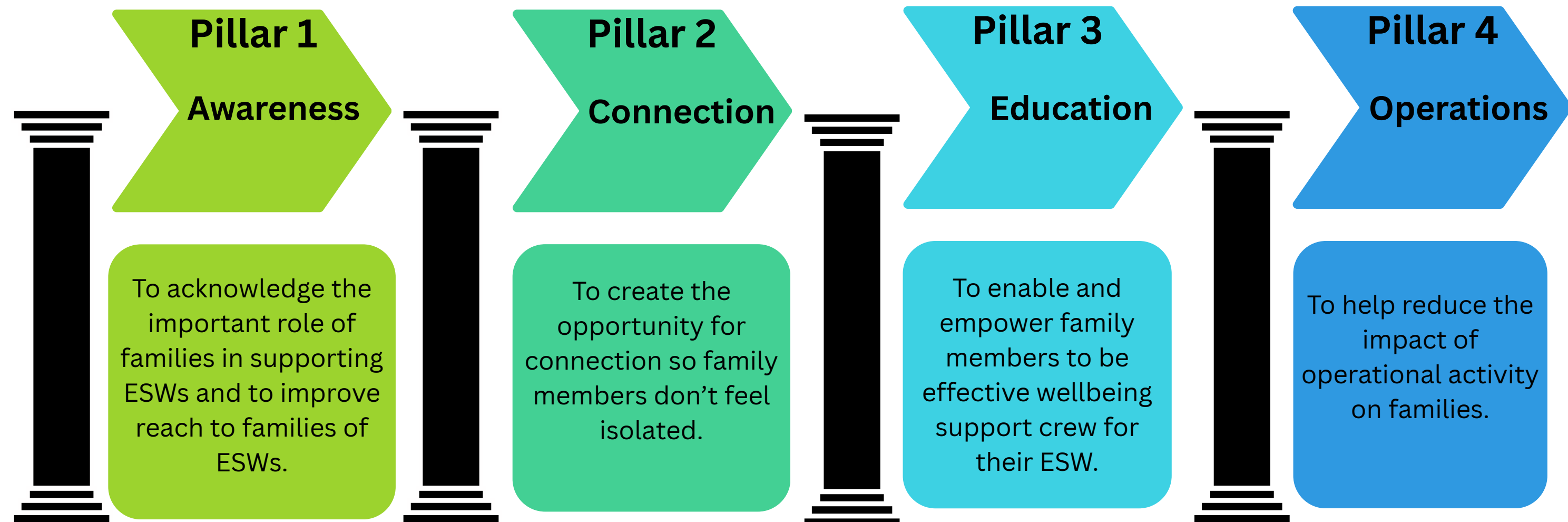(Lawrence et al., 2018)

Why Support Families?

Families are the first to notice changes in ESWs and play a large role in enabling deployments.

But the level of support they receive is marginal at best.

Family Matters Strategy Pillars

Pillar 1
Awareness

To acknowledge the important role of families in supporting ESWs and to improve reach to families of ESWs.

Pillar 2
Connection

To create the opportunity for connection so family members don't feel isolated.

Pillar 3
Education

To enable and empower family members to be effective wellbeing support crew for their ESW.

Pillar 4
Operations

To help reduce the impact of operational activity on families.

Challenges Faced by Families of ESWs

Day-to-day challenges of families of ESWs.

Tangible Challenges

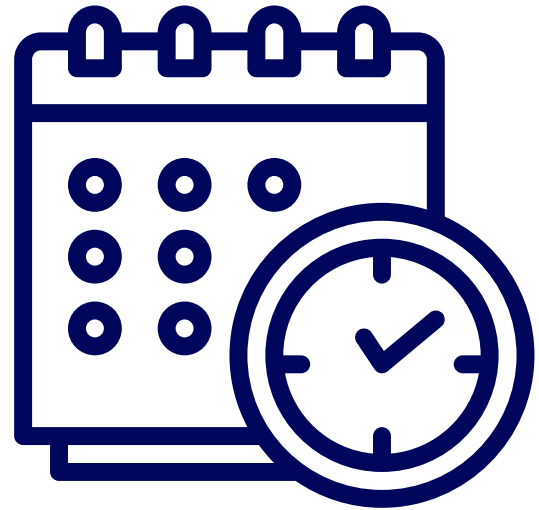Additional work, financial burden, or obstacles to achieving personal goals

Emotional Challenges

New stressors or irritations that affect the inner lives of the family

Relationship Challenges

Obstacles to the ESW and family member's relationship

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Tangible Challenges

Schedule based on ESW's availability

Childcare
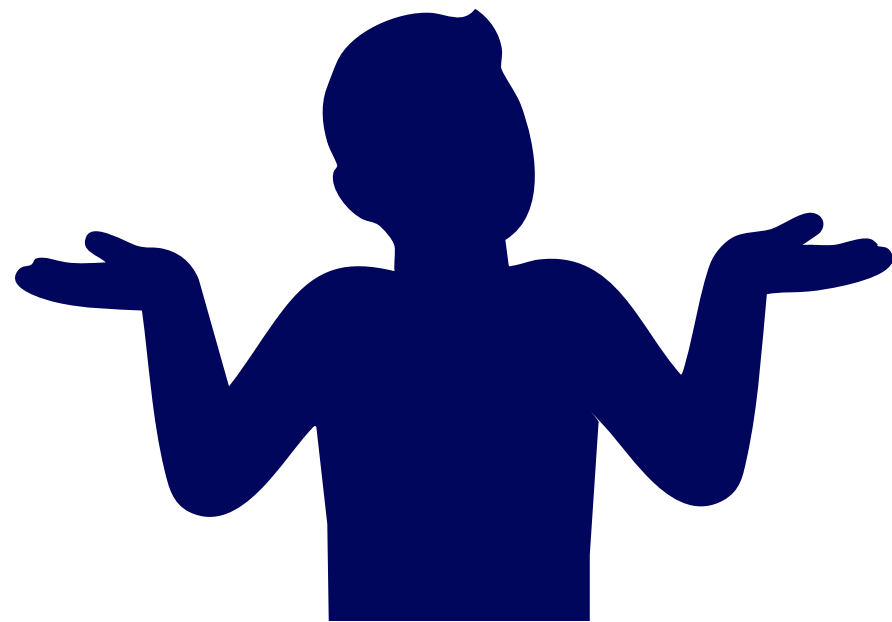
Living/working in a certain location
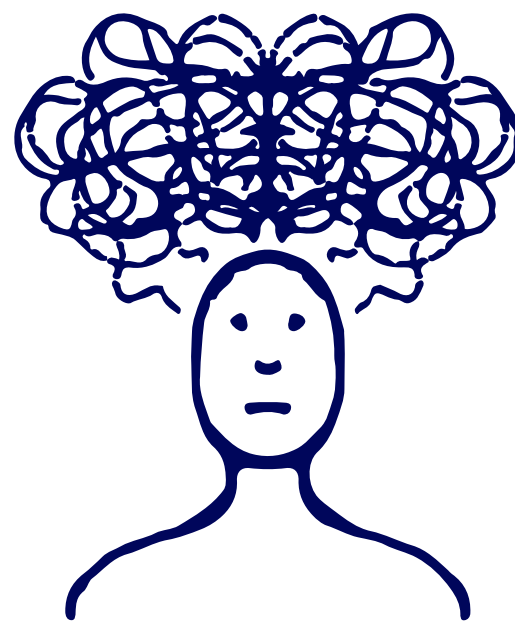
Increased housework burden

Sacrificing career opportunities
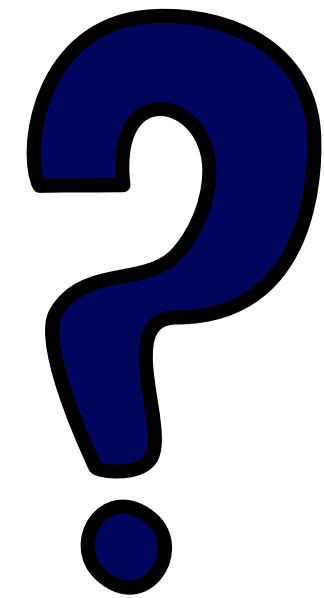
Emotional Challenges

Lack of recognition

Worry for ESW's safety

Stress due to home burdens

Uncertainty

Relationship Challenges

Tension when ESW returns

Own challenges come second to ESW

ESW withdraws emotionally

What We Learned: Agency Interviews

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

Agencies aim to support the mental health of ESWs through professional counseling.
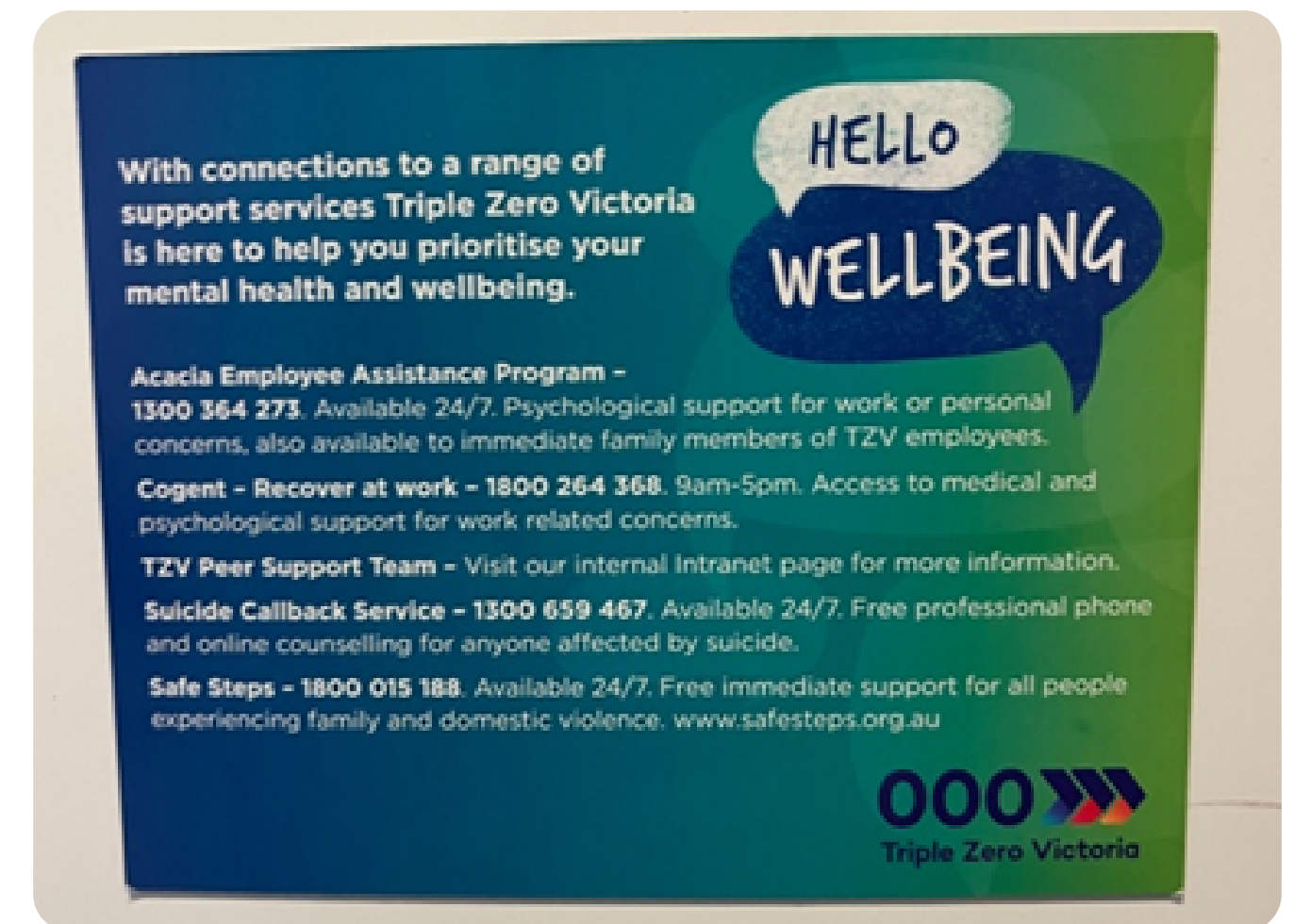
Peer Support Networks

Some agencies provide networks of peers to support each other.

Communication with Families

Agencies attempt to communicate with families indirectly with fridge magnets, handouts, and pamphlets.

Getting information to the families is a major challenge.

"Reaching our members with information about what's available to them is pretty tough. **Never mind reaching their family members whose details we don't actually have.**"

- Organizational Wellbeing Manager

ESW Family Experiences

Challenges

Financial considerations

Uncertainty before a deployment

Increase in home labor

Worry for health and safety

Absence of ESW at family events

Supporting ESW after deployment

Before Deployment → **During Deployment** → **After Deployment**

Families and ESWs staying in contact

Informal community networks

Discussing incident within family

Sharing information about deployments

Informal Supports

> "My son ... had a big presentation, the grade six pinnacle of all their study for primary school. **Now his dad wasn't there**. Now we have to prepare him for that. My daughter's [going to] have a showcase, a dancing thing, and he's not [going to] be there."
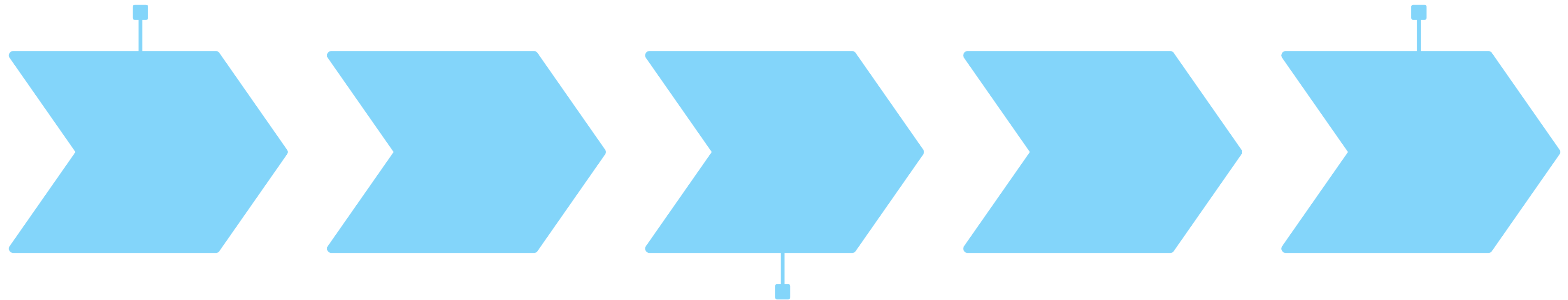
Recommendations

Pre-Deployment

Collect Contact Information of Families

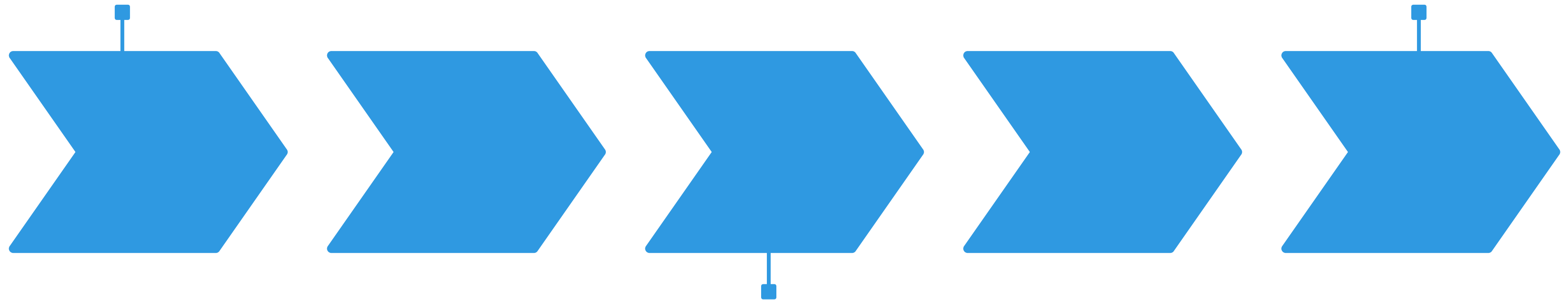**Provide Information About Deployments Directly to Family Members**

Establish Direct Communication Channels with Families

During Deployment

Maintain Formal Communication with Families Throughout Deployments

Strengthen Family, Peer and Community Support Networks
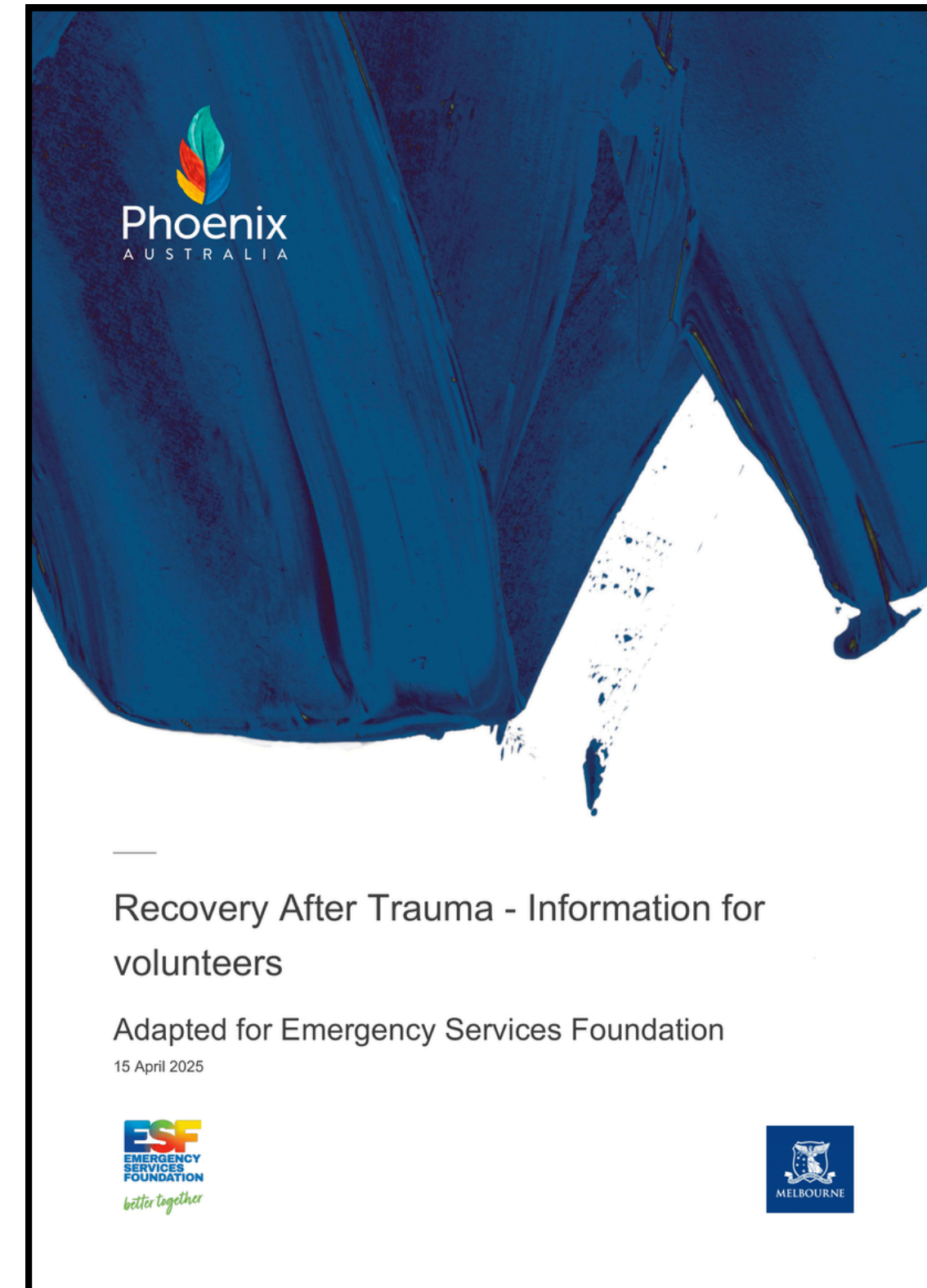
Explore Feasible Supports to Reduce Home Burden

Post-Deployment

Recognise and Reinforce the Contribution of Families

Improve Awareness of Family-Focused Mental Health Supports

Existing Resources
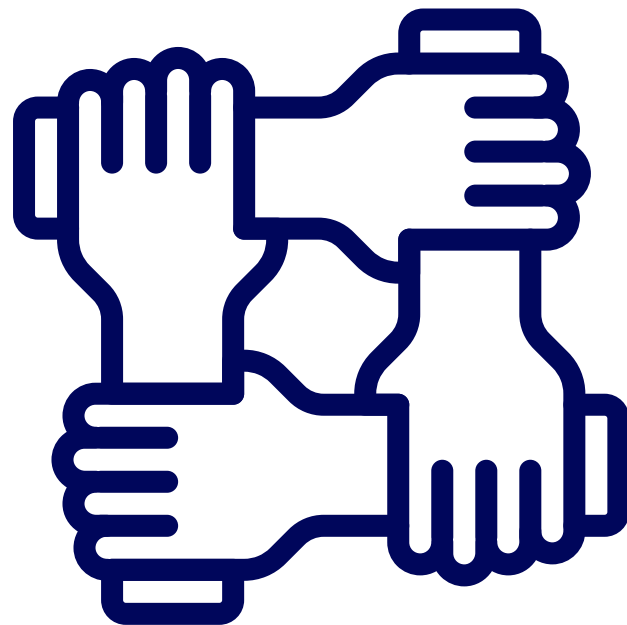
Key Takeaways

1 **Currently available resources are not reaching families.**

Agencies report struggling to reach families.
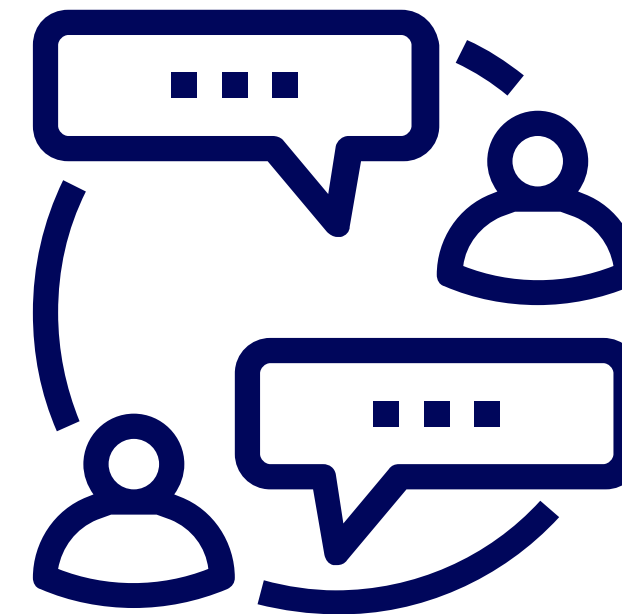
Most families do not report using agency resources.

3 Families want to be stakeholders in the deployment process.

Now Imagine This...

Thank you to the Emergency Services Foundation, specifically Martine Gilliot, Siusan MacKenzie, & Professor Karina Jorritsma, as well as to all of the interviewees and agencies who made this study possible.

Questions?

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