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ESF IMPACT

newsletter

August 2026



ESF Mental Health Showcase 2026

The Emergency Services Foundation partnered with AFAC to present their annual **Mental Health Showcase 2026**, bringing people together from across the emergency services sector to focus on workplace mental health – to share what we know, learn from each other, and, importantly, challenge ourselves to do better.

In her opening speech, ESF CEO Siusan MacKenzie affirmed that mental

'I'm fine.' As she put it: "How are you?" shouldn't just be a greeting – it should be a genuine question.

Creating psychologically safe workplaces in emergency services

This message carried through the panel "Ready to Respond: Why Psychological Safety Matters", where WorkSafe representative Natassia Goode, organisational psychologist Louisa Detez, FRV Principal Occupational Psychologist Saranyae Manisegaran and Australian Psychological Services Team Lead Mark Oostergo explored why psychological safety is such an important protective factor in emergency services.

Due to the nature of emergency services work, **exposure to high stress, trauma and other psychosocial hazards cannot always be fully eliminated.** However, organisations can still reduce psychosocial risk by designing work that supports recovery, streamlining processes, building trust and strengthening leadership and capability.

A key message was that **consultation is the key control.** Organisations need to listen to their people, understand the risks they face and involve them in developing solutions. Because when it comes to psychosocial safety, the focus should be on **fixing the work, not the worker**



Family violence and first responders

Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre Directors Associate Professor Bridget Harris and Dr Naomi Pfitzner presented their research on family violence and first responders, highlighting the critical role emergency service personnel can play in recognising perpetrator strategies and supporting victim-survivors.

The way first responders engage and interact with victim-survivors of family violence can significantly shape their future decisions about seeking help. **Negative or dismissive experiences can create mistrust in emergency services and make it more difficult for victim-survivors to seek help again.**



This makes it particularly important for first responders to arrive without assumptions about how a victim-survivor is “supposed” to behave. **Every experience of family violence is different, and victim-survivors may respond in ways that do not align with common expectations of fear, distress or willingness to disclose.**

First responders must also be aware of the ways perpetrators may attempt to shape the narrative. Coercive strategies such as denial, justification and minimisation can obscure the reality of what is happening and influence how a situation is understood. **It is therefore crucial to listen to and validate victim-survivors’ experiences, recognising them as experts in their own lived experience and their own safety.**

Families Matter

For the following session, ESF looked across the border to Canada and spoke with **Dr Heidi Cramm, lead of Garnet Families, which connects military, veteran, first responder and public safety families with research, resources and community.**

Dr Cramm highlighted how the demands of public safety work can ripple into family life, bringing uncertainty, disruption and accumulated stress. Her

This is an area ESF has also explored through its research, resulting in the development of the **Families Guide in collaboration with Victoria Police's Greg Dean**. The practical resource provides families with useful wellbeing and mental health information and is now routinely provided to new Victoria Police recruits.

Learn more the about ESF's Residential Wellbeing Program



Suicide risk and prevention within the emergency services sector

Dr Nicole Sadler from Phoenix Australia explored the complexity of suicide risk in emergency services, particularly given exposure to trauma, cumulative stress and occupational pressures.

She highlighted protective factors including **good leadership, strong social connections, and secure employment and housing**, while emphasising that pathways to support aren't always medical. Families, friends, leaders and colleagues can all play a role in recognising when someone may be struggling

She explained that effective suicide prevention therefore requires looking beyond individual interventions and considering the broader systems, workplaces, relationships and communities that can either increase risk or provide protection.



Supporting return to work success

Emma Gollings from the WorkSafe Clinical Panel explored the challenges surrounding mental injury claims and the important role workplaces play in supporting recovery and a safe return to work.

She underscored **the importance of early, effective and ongoing support, as well as the critical role managers play in facilitating a safe and successful return to work.** A supportive connection with the workplace can make a significant difference during recovery and staying in touch helps demonstrate that the worker has not been forgotten – making the process of returning to work feel less daunting.

To support return to work success, ESF has developed its Residential Wellbeing Program. Designed for emergency service workers experiencing

clinicians guiding participants through learning, reflection, and practical wellbeing strategies.

[Learn more about ESF's Residential Wellbeing Program](#)

Deployment and wellbeing

Facilitated by CFA Psychologist & Senior Wellbeing Manager Suzanne Leckie, the panel session “Deployment and Wellbeing: Rethinking Support for Our People” **explored the unique challenges emergency service personnel face during deployments and the importance of providing proactive, accessible and consistent wellbeing support.**

“Rather than waiting for people to seek help, wellbeing personnel need to insert themselves into basecamps, develop rapport and build trust”, explained Darren Pockock, FRV. This means being visible and approachable so that, if something does happen, people know exactly who they can turn to.

Peter Fryer, SES, reinforced this approach, explaining that wellbeing support should not rely on identifying the people who appear most likely to need help and approaching them individually. **Instead, go and talk to everybody.** This can also help reduce stigma: If wellbeing personnel are visible and routinely speaking with everyone, seeking them out does not become a public signal that someone is struggling.

FRV psychologist Irina Tchernitskaia, spoke about **the importance of providing support that is not tied too closely to an individual agency.** When people are deployed across agencies and jurisdictions, having someone who is seen as independent can make it easier for workers to engage openly and seek support.



Designing neuroinclusive workplaces

Dr Rose D'Almada Remedios, Head of Research at Diversity Council Australia, and Ambulance Victoria's Disability Inclusion Program Lead Amber Smith presented approaches to managing and embracing neurodiversity in emergency services.

Rose highlighted the high rates of burnout and mental ill-health experienced by neurodivergent people, reinforcing the need for genuinely neuroinclusive workplaces, policies and wellbeing supports.

Amber then shared Ambulance Victoria's experience of embedding neuroinclusion, asking an important question: **How do we create a workplace where people don't have to hide how they think to do their job safely and belong?**

AV's approach involved shifting away from viewing neurodivergence as a series of individual problems to be fixed and instead looking for organisational patterns that needed to change. These weren't people who couldn't do their jobs. They were capable people trying to succeed in workplaces that had not always been designed with different ways of thinking, learning and communicating in mind.

Across all sessions it became clear, that improving mental health in emergency services is not about finding one solution or one program, but rather about continuing to listen, learn and challenge the way we work.

Most importantly, **the Showcase reminded us that meaningful change starts with the small things – noticing, asking, listening, creating connection and being willing to do things differently.** The challenge now is to take these conversations beyond the Showcase and turn them into action to create emergency service workplaces where people feel supported, understood and safe.

More event info and photos

“I found it very interesting to hear what is being done to support mental health and wellbeing of emergency services workers and volunteers in Victoria, as opposed to ACT where I work.”

Kym “Twisty” Schmid, SES ACT

“My favourite session was the one about deployment and wellbeing. It was great to hear all these different perspectives from all these different people and that we could all be together to do that.”

Hayley Ettershank, CFA

“This is a very passionate environment to be in with so many likeminded individuals who are pro-mental health. It’s nice to feel engaged within the sector.”

Dean Adams, AV

“Every one of the presentations was highly relevant for our work. Victoria has a great collaborative approach across agencies and it is something that would be wonderful to have more of in New South Wales.”

Jenn Black, NSW

“It was great to meet people from other agencies, working together and bringing in different ideas and approaches to responder wellbeing.”

Jemma Cumberland, Victoria Police

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