

SUBMISSION

6 December 2023

Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience.

Honourable Members of the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience,

It is with a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to the well-being of our communities that the Veterans, Emergency Services, and Police Industry Institute Australia, VESPIIA, submits this document to the Senate Select Committee. As an institute dedicated to advancing the support structures for the organisations, staff, and volunteers supporting our Veterans, Emergency Services, and Police personnel, we recognise the critical role that disaster resilience plays in ensuring the safety and recovery of our nation. Our submission reflects collective insights, experiences, and recommendations to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on Australia's disaster resilience, with the ultimate goal of fostering a more resilient and supportive environment for those who serve on the frontlines.

ABOUT VESPIIA

The Veterans, Emergency Services & Police Industry Institute of Australia (VESPIIA) stands as the pioneering professional body in Australia, uniquely crafted to champion the tireless efforts of those who support the backbone of our nation—Veterans, Emergency Services, Police, and their families. Serving as a dedicated bastion of support, VESPIIA provides initiatives designed to uplift the organisations, committed staff, and selfless volunteers who tirelessly deliver essential support and programs to the heroes in our communities.

At the heart of VESPIIA's mission is a comprehensive approach to advocacy, amplifying the sector's collective voice to influence positive change. The institute is a nexus of professional development, fostering growth and expertise among those who dedicate themselves to service. Through a dynamic array of networking events, recognition programs, and the provision of vital resources, VESPIIA ensures that these pillars of support have the tools, knowledge, and networks required to excel in their critical roles.

More than a professional body, VESPIIA represents a continuum of service, recognising that supporting those who, in turn, support our service communities is an ongoing commitment. As the institute propels forward, it remains steadfast in its dedication to creating an ecosystem where the supporters of our nation's defenders receive the backing, they need to carry out their noble work effectively and with unwavering commitment. VESPIIA, at its core, is an instrumental force in fortifying the foundation of gratitude, support, and excellence upon which our service communities thrive.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

VESPIIA's submission will speak to the following Terms of Reference set out for the Senate Select Committee for Australia's Disaster Resilience:

- (a) current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including:
 - i. the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability;
- (b) consideration of alternative models, including:
 - i. repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services
- (c) consideration of the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters; and
- (d) any related matters.

SUBMISSION

On October 19th 2023, VESPIIA convened a pivotal round table in collaboration with the University of Western Australia Defence and Security Institute. This round table sought key stakeholders across the sector and established Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs) who have demonstrated success in providing for the wellbeing of first responders and veterans of the ADF throughout their transition from service and their post-service lives, intending to identify gaps and needs in service provision, answer critical questions to enable further development, and commit to a collaborative approach to ensuring the wellbeing of first responders and their families across Western Australia.

In the face of impending challenges, 2023 brings a sobering reality - Australia is bracing for what experts predict to be the most devastating bushfire season on record. This impending threat necessitates a comprehensive and proactive approach to disaster resilience, first responder capability, and the critical component of well-being. In response to this pressing need, a distinguished panel of experts and stakeholders convened at a round table discussion to explore, analyse, and propose strategies that can mitigate the devastating impact of bushfires on our communities, first responders, and the environment.

The 2023 bushfire season looms as a potent reminder of the relentless forces of nature and the heroism of those who stand at the forefront, battling the blazes and ensuring the safety of our communities. Yet, we must equip our first responders with the necessary tools, support, and strategies to not only confront the challenges ahead but to do so while safeguarding their own physical and mental well-being.

We heard many testimonies from front line personnel ranging from the struggles to acquire personal protective equipment (PPE) to interagency communications, the mobilisation of 800 firefighters, with 600 deployed to eastern states and the challenges in bringing them back to WA to respond to local disasters. Challenges accessing capability and support in regional and remote communities and managing all of that in the middle of an unprecedented global pandemic event, with the long-term effects on the health and wellbeing of responders still unknown.

First Responder Wellbeing

The last five years have seen one large-scale disaster after another. The fires of Black Summer, which left thousands of Australians across the country displaced and traumatised, had barely been put out when the world entered the COVID-19 global pandemic, rapidly changing the needs of communities and how defence, police, fire services and ambulance would be able to respond. Amid the pandemic, natural disasters stopped for nothing, with Cyclone Seroja tearing apart regional and remote communities and the recent Fitzroy Floods destroying access to the Kimberly and the West Australians residing there, not to mention the devastating floods in Northern New South Wales and Queensland and the increasing destruction of each new bushfire season.

There hasn't been a moment to breathe for our first responders, as the fire season, usually anticipated from December through March each year, begins earlier and earlier every successive summer. This round table provided a brief moment for first response agencies to report on some of the positive learnings throughout the past few years and highlight what is needed to allow our first responders to continue safeguarding our communities while prioritising their health and well-being.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) in Western Australia responds to 26 different types of hazards, the world's second-largest remit of any emergency management agency. These hazards include bushfires, residential and industrial fires, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, storms, cyclones, hazmat, search and rescue, and marine rescue, often requiring a coordinated response between DFES, WA Police (WAPOL), St John Ambulance (SJA) and Defence. Over 90% of the DFES workforce are volunteers, meaning additional support and coordination are required to mobilise personnel, especially in rural and remote areas.

Since 2017, DFES has been in a constant state of readiness to deploy to any of its 26 assigned hazards. Summer 2022 alone saw 4 level 3 bushfires and 2023 is predicted to be one of the worst bushfire seasons on record.

In addition to their regular operations, all agencies went into overdrive during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only was there a challenge in accessing personal protective equipment (PPE), but there were also significant breakdowns in communication across government and agencies, information flowing at tremendous speed, allowing for the rapid spread of misinformation to agencies and, dangerously, to the public.

The long-term effects on the well-being of responders in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Black Summer and subsequent disaster events simultaneously are yet to be fully realised. All agencies are reporting a high level of burnout among responders, and with no reprieve on the horizon, as we enter Summer 2023/24, the well-being of responders is at a higher risk than ever.

Families

The impact of service on the families of first responders is constant. Each day the responder sets off for work is another day of stress and anxiety for the families, waiting for a healthy responder to walk back in the door. Add to this the stress and burden placed upon the non-responding spouse and parent to maintain home and family during a prolonged deployment, such as during bushfires and flood recoveries.



Like Defence families, we ask a tremendous sacrifice from the families of first responders. The long-term effects of this should be more researched and often neglected in discussions surrounding the health and well-being of first responders, especially where children are concerned.

The families of service personnel (first responders and Defence alike) similarly have very little reprieve from the constant demands of service. Families are impacted not just during the disaster event or deployment. It's the everyday asks that can add a tremendous amount of stress, pressure, and anxiety at home. The training exercises, long shifts, urgent callouts, need-to-know information flow, and consistent uncertainties reinforce that service isn't just any other job. It affects every aspect of life for the personnel and their families. The uncertainty and waiting for the call to go out for the families of Volunteer forces can be excruciating.

Then, when the unfortunate happens, such as an injury sustained during service, everything ramps up again. The fear that strikes when a spouse gets that call that there's been an injury during service is unlike any other our families experience. They wonder how severe the injury is, what treatment looks like, and what service will look like after this injury. Will they ever be able to return to their front line, and how do you comfort someone when their ability to serve hangs in the balance? How do you explain to your child that one of their parents is injured and life may never be the same again?

Add to this the process of then having to navigate respective compensatory bodies and limit the potential financial burden this could create for the family during the personnel's recovery and ensure the wellbeing of the rest of the family as well as space for the spouse to process and work through their own feelings all at the same time.

While all serving personnel belong to tight-knit communities, and some support in individual social networks may be available to the families during this time, there is limited to no overarching framework to catch these families in times of their own crises. When we discuss the well-being and health of first responders in Western Australia and beyond, their families must also be at the forefront of these discussions.

Children, especially those of first responders, have little to no formal support through their schools and other third spaces that exist for them as part of this community, facing unique challenges that are often difficult to explain to them, let alone their friends on the playground. The ability to seek support that understands what they're going through as the child of a responder on any given day is vital to their overall well-being and health. Defence has placed some focus on initiatives for the children of active service members, such as the Defence School Mentor (DSM) program. This program places a mentor in schools with identified populations of children of active service members. Often, these Mentors act part-time, so while some support is available to these children, it is limited. However, no such program exists to support the children of Police, DFES or Ambulance personnel.

Creating an extra challenge to this is the lack of data available to us surrounding the number of children a program like this may be accessible to, leading to a recommendation to explore how we can obtain the required data sets to build a practical support framework for children in and out of school. The families of our first responders deserve access to dedicated support not only during these large-scale events but each and every day they stand behind our first responders and beyond.

Community

During a disaster or critical event, the ones impacted the most are the communities in which they occur. Bushfires and floods destroy homes, businesses, places of gathering, and lives. After the disaster has been contained, responders go home, and the community is left to pick up the pieces, trying to find a new normal amidst unbearable loss and suffering, which could take years to find if they ever do.

There is a need to have a greater understanding of the current education opportunities for members of the community to be prepared in the event of a disaster and to ensure consistency across the content and information provided. Social media plays an integral part in information delivery in this age of technology; however, for all the good it can achieve, there are many drawbacks to it as a means of communication.

Rural Bush Fire Brigades (RBFB), State Emergency Services (SES), and other community organisations, primarily volunteer-led, do an incredible job of arming and educating their local communities to the best of their ability. It is crucial that these services are also provided with access to support, education, and capability to enable them to continue to do so as effectively as possible.

A significant gap in services available in remote and regional areas has been noted, including access to trauma-informed psychological services. Pre and post-care in the event of disaster require a dedicated inquiry, designated support and education to ensure the long-term well-being of residents in these affected communities. While there is a shortage of providers across the country for a range of mental and psychological support services, a focus on trauma-informed services must be prioritised, as with the looming threat of a climate crisis on the horizon, each summer set to be worse than the last, our communities and first responders will need to access these services more than ever.

Faith-based services play an essential role in the well-being of first responders, families and communities alike throughout these times of crisis. From seeking sanctuary to seeking guidance, Religious Leaders provide a type of support unlike any other during these times. Support and training should be available, so they are best positioned to provide the support required during crises such as natural disasters.



Communication

Throughout the pandemic and black summer fires, we saw a rise in misinformation online and a delay in getting critical information to regional and remote communities. Additionally, the ability to enable communities with preventative education was lacking, meaning that amid disaster, a delay in getting the correct information to save the lives and livelihoods of these communities took much longer and took more effort and resources than needed.

Traditional and Social Media play a significant role in spreading good and bad information, often being the first to report on incidents before it has been communicated to those who need to know first. During the round table, we heard stories that the families of first responders found out their loved one was injured while battling a bushfire through reporting on social media before DFES had had the chance to reach out to the family with accurate information. Vague reporting of the incident could lead a family to believe the severity of the injury is far worse or even question whether or not their family member is alive, adding to the already extreme levels of anxiety the families of responders face.

The flow of accurate and up-to-date information can make the difference between life and death during a natural disaster or critical event, and being able to reach regional and remote communities is imperative. There are effective communication tools in place, such as [Emergency.wa.gov.au](https://www.emergency.wa.gov.au); however, ensuring this information is accessible in the midst of a crisis is essential.

Also noted through the discussion was the difficulty in communicating the access members of affected communities have to relief and recovery funds and programs after a disaster. The information can be found through multiple sources, each showing differing information and available programs, communicating this to potential recipients and the applicants themselves, attempting to navigate confusing information in times of extreme stress and distress.

In addition to this is the information flow between agencies, ensuring that first responders and operational centres have consistent access to accurate operational and tactical knowledge on and off the front lines. As noted in ear, an interagency working group is tackling this issue.

Collaboration

The Defence Strategic Review (DSR) 2023 recently recommended that defence units should only be deployed in response to natural disasters if absolutely necessary. While Western Australia has a demonstrated history of exceptional response in these times without the aid of full-time Australian Defence Force (ADF) support due to lack of access to 'regular' battalion forces, this recommendation places further pressure and demand on the police, firefighters, paramedics and other emergency services who are deployed to these crises.

Now that reliance can only be placed on the ADF in a last resort capacity, or where specialised operations and capabilities are required, there is a need for better collaboration between not-for-profits and private industry to respond to both the event itself and in the aftermath. Considering that approximately 90% of DFES personnel are volunteer forces, it is well to assume that those in the community willing to volunteer already are, thereby creating a need to collaborate and utilise private industry to enhance the available capability when needed most.

This collaboration must begin somewhere. The round table discussion hosted by UWA DSI and VESPIIA is a first step to bringing some of these parties together to tackle pressing issues facing our first responders. It cannot stop there, though. Not only does a mechanism for collaboration need to exist, but there also needs to be a greater understanding of the private and non-profit sectors offering relevant goods, services, and capabilities.

This creates an opportunity for industries, such as the Defence Industry, to look at how their technologies and capabilities may be applied to first response in times of natural disaster and other crisis events. Additionally, local businesses in regional and remote areas can also play a more prominent role in protecting their communities during these times. Especially in disasters such as cyclones and tropical storms where communication back to metro areas may be limited or cut off entirely. Access to local support may make all the difference in rapid response in regional and remote areas.

The Veteran community and ESOs have a significant history of providing programs and services to Veterans and their families to ensure their health and well-being. They have seen tremendous success in changing the landscape of available services to this community. Suicide and suicidality have been significant challenges to overcome. While this will be an ongoing concern, the last decade has provided an exceptional amount of research and learning when it comes to providing support and programs to the cohort, which can and should be applied to the first responder communities.

While trauma may be sustained through a range of differing events, much coincides across all services where the well-being of the personnel is concerned. Considering the investment and focus the Veteran community has been given in recent years, we should look to ESOs for expertise and guidance in providing the same or similar programs and services to first responders and their families. This creates an opportunity for ESOs and other not-for-profit organisations to work closely with agencies like WAPOL, DFES, and SJA to increase access for their staff and volunteers to the support they need to ensure their welfare.

These ESOs and non-profit organisations must be appropriately supported throughout this. Resources and funding are often limited, and while some organisations may be poised already to expand their remit to include first responders or to provide their knowledge and experience to others, analysis should be conducted to ensure all organisations, regardless of size, can



be appropriately supported to do so. Similarly, to private industry, an understanding of organisations working within the sector will need to be gained, as well as identifying their needs and expanding their ability to support first responders. A handful of organisations are solely dedicated to the well-being of first responders and have done incredible work so far. Like agencies and responders, they deserve to be supported and have greater access to knowledge and resources to capture as many responders and their families who need support as possible.

Conclusion

VESPIIA is dedicated to playing a role in bolstering the resilience of first responders and the broader community during times of natural disasters. Our commitment extends beyond rhetoric; we are dedicated to actively engaging in initiatives that enhance preparedness, education, and support networks. By fostering collaboration, leveraging technological advancements, and embracing a holistic understanding of resilience, VESPIIA endeavours to make tangible contributions to the well-being and preparedness of those who dedicate their lives to serving others and the communities they protect. Additionally, VESPIIA has offered the following recommendations for consideration by both State and Federal Government for inquiry and offer our support in their implementation.



Recommendations

1. First Responder Well-being

- 1.1 Creation of a plan to better utilise the network of Padres and faith-based support across agencies, including Defence, for the wellbeing of first responders and community in times of crisis.
- 1.2 Raising of a dedicated health and wellbeing centre for first responders and their families to access care and support. The value of this is being demonstrated by RSLWA with Veterans Central in the Perth CBD.
- 1.3 Allowing ongoing access to tele-health and de-identified health and wellbeing services for first responders.
- 1.4 Review of the current post-incident protocol and evaluation of the inclusion of post-incident and post-deployment briefings for first responders. Allowing for immediate identification of those in need of greater support, such is standard protocol for Defence Members.

2. Families

- 2.1 Investigation into the viability and efficacy of raising of a DSM equivalent program to support the children of first responders.
- 2.2 The inclusion of an opt-in identifier on school enrolment forms to provide data on which a DSM equivalent would support students.
- 2.3 Investigation into raising an equivalent agency to the Defence Member Family Support office to better support the well-being of the families of first responders.

3. Community

- 3.1 Review of any current available community education programs for response in times of natural disaster, consolidation of content to create a program available for delivery across Western Australia, with a focus on prevention, preparation, planning, and wellbeing, ensuring accessibility in delivery to First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.
- 3.2 Inquiry into the lack of trauma-informed services available to first responders and community outside of the metro area, with recommendations presented to rectify.

4. Communication

- 4.1 Appropriate support and resources provided by Governments to aid the development and implementation of an Interagency Communication Protocol and Network to enable communication.
- 4.2 Enhanced communication protocols for communities in regional and remote communities, especially for First Nations and CALD communities to ensure timely delivery of accurate information.
- 4.3 Consolidation and simplification of information on available relief and recovery funds for affected communities and where to find it, ensuring accessibility for First Nations and CALD communities.

5. Collaboration

- 5.1 Utilisation of a Joint Command approach for Operation Centres during disaster events and critical incidents with the inclusion of Industry and Not-for-profit organisations to enable a proactive approach to the well-being of responders and community.
- 5.2 Creation of a network of industry and not-for-profits providing goods, services, and programs to the sector to enable the above.
- 5.3 Provision of professional development and training for first responders, not-for-profit, and industry, with a focus on the delivery of health and wellbeing programs and services to first responders and their families.
- 5.4 State and Federal Government support of a professional body to provide a continuous centralised approach to the support and collaboration of services for first responders, veterans, industry, and families; provide access to professional development, and discussion; and provide advice on relevant policy issues.

6. Research

- 6.1 Research supported by State and Federal Governments to improve the knowledge and understanding of the effects of disaster events and critical incidents for first responders, their families, and communities. Topics could and should include but are not limited to the following:
 - Long-term impact of COVID-19 and Summer Fire Seasons on first responders and communities
 - Moral injury sustained by first responders during and after disaster events and critical incidents and available treatment and support options.
 - Long-term effects of service and continual deployments on families of first responders and the risk and rates of suicide and suicidality within this cohort.
 - Long-term effects of disaster for communities affected in regional and remote areas, with particular focus on First Nations communities.

