COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO THE RECOGNITION AND ADEQUACY OF THE RESPONSES BY STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES TO EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA BY WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS ARISING FROM DISASTERS

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 23 MAY 2012

SESSION ONE

Members

Mr A.P. O'Gorman (Chairman)
Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)
Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.G. Stephens

Hearing commenced 9.38 am

JOLLY, MR KEVIN
Secretary, United Firefighters Union of Australia (WA Branch),
21 View Street,
North Perth 6024, examined:

MARTINELLI, MR FRANK
President, United Firefighters Union of Australia (WA Branch),
21 View Street,
North Perth 6024, examined:

ANDERSON, MS LEA
Assistant Secretary, United Firefighters Union of Australia (WA Branch),
21 View Street,
North Perth 6024, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, I will read you a statement and ask you a couple of questions. I ask that you answer verbally rather than just nodding or shaking your head so that Hansard can record your response.

The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed a "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee this morning?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start throwing some questions at you, do you have an opening statement that you would like to make?

Ms Anderson: We welcome the opportunity to address the committee. We will be providing a written position paper to the committee at a later date. We have read the transcripts of other evidence that has been put before you, as well as submissions. We have a couple of case studies that we have prepared, which will probably come out in answers to some of the questions that you may put to us, which we think respond specifically to the terms of reference of this inquiry.

The CHAIRMAN: We will start throwing some questions at you. If we do not get some of your case studies there, I am sure you will find a way to get them in here.

How effective does the union think the current FESA procedures are in preparing the state's firefighters and volunteers to deal with the stress of their jobs and in assisting with disasters?

Mr Jolly: We do not think it is that effective at all. We have some concerns. If we go back in time—I think it was around 1988—the union was very instrumental in setting up the peer support program. Since FESA has come to fruition, the systems have broken down and there is more of this type of stress in the workforce than there was in 1988 because of the systems and the way business is done now. We do not think FESA has accepted its responsibilities adequately.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: There was an incident in West Perth last Wednesday involving a warehouse fire. It was widely publicised that there was asbestos there, and some concerns were expressed about the safety of people in the area. Your members had to go in and fight that fire. That obviously translates—although it was not a disaster—into the families of firefighters having concerns.

Mr Jolly: Absolutely.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What sort of mechanisms does FESA use to address the issues of firefighters' families?

Mr Jolly: They are some of the fundamentals that we believe are breaking down—they do not go far enough. A lot of spouses have hidden trauma that has not surfaced or been realised. Those types of incidents, even firefighters are now feeling vulnerable because of the lack of systems. As you would be aware of the evidence, cancer is now more prevalent in firefighters. It is known that asbestos causes mesothelioma. It takes only one fibre to cause those types of diseases. That creates stress for firefighters when they go into those situations. It might not be realised there and then.

Ms Anderson: If I may, the union strongly supports the small and chronically underresourced welfare team that operates in FESA. That team consists of the chaplain, the two uniformed personnel and the clinical psychologist. We do not think that there are enough people in that unit. We have seen a significant improvement in FESA's response following the introduction of the two uniformed officers into that unit. We frequently refer our members and on some occasions we refer members' families to FESA through the welfare unit or directly to the Employees Assistance Program. What you may not understand—Kevin and Frank can talk about this in a bit more detail—is that the union has a dedicated welfare position on its branch committee. We have had that position for some decades. Currently the position is held by District Officer Steven Matthews, who is the senior vice president of the union. The value of that work even within our own systems is that if we are dealing with a member's issue—whatever that issue may be—and we identify that there is a welfare aspect to that problem, we trigger a welfare report internally. In addition, we often ring the welfare unit and depending on the nature of the problem that could be any of them—the chaplain, the psychologist or the two uniformed officers. Probably we do nearly as much welfare work as we do industrial work which, in our view, sets us significantly apart from the rest of the union movement. It is one of the things that we consider that we have done quite well. As Kevin indicated earlier, the union was instrumental in establishing the peer support program in the late 1980s. In addition to that, the union raised concerns about resilience-building and response from FESA as part of the campaign to trigger FESA's occupational health and safety audit, which was done a couple of years ago, and which has identified some significant gaps.

The CHAIRMAN: You have mentioned the peer support group a couple of times. What was the intention of the union when it set that up, how was it set up and why has it fallen away?

Mr Jolly: I believe it was set up primarily by the union. They used to have what they termed "international tours". Members on the committee used to visit other countries with like operations and unions. It was sort of replicating what was done in England and America. That was the basis of setting it up here, seeing that there was a need. In those days the fire brigade had a lot of Vietnam veterans. It was very real—we could see that they were further traumatised because of their exposure within the fire service. That is how it all came about.

The CHAIRMAN: How does the peer support group work? What training do peer supporters get?

Mr Jolly: They have professional training. First up, they ask for volunteers to be nominated. It comes from the membership of the union. They apply. I am not sure how they were chosen, but a number of people were put up. Quite a few were not successful. I do not know the rationale for that.

The CHAIRMAN: Did FESA ever get on board with the peer support group?

Mr Jolly: FESA ran it. The union instigated it then FESA took it on board and, through the membership, it coordinated it.

Mr Martinelli: They were also in the country so we had not only the metropolitan area, but it was also covering the country districts as well. They were from the floor; guys who basically put their hands up and did some training. They were basically the first stage of contact on site. If something was happening, they would travel out to the volunteers as well. So the career guys were actually looking after the vols in the early stages.

The CHAIRMAN: When and why did that stop happening?

Mr Jolly: I have to correct myself; I actually said FESA but it was the fire brigade board back in the 80s. FESA came into fruition in 1998. Somewhere in the early to mid-90s was the change in the structure or operations of the fire brigade. As you would be aware, FESA took over in 1998. It started to taper off in the mid-90s. I guess it was a money restraint thing and whether the hierarchy at the time thought it was worthwhile. There were a lot of people going into the upper echelons in the fire service that did not have a lot of experience. I think with a lack of experience comes a lack of knowledge and a lack of appreciation of those types of causes.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Is that a roundabout way of saying that the senior management of FESA did not have a lot of operational experience and, therefore, did not understand the impacts?

Mr Jolly: Exactly.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: One of the issues that we have come across in our inquiry is the need for giving frontline personnel down time so that they can rest and recover. The number of career firefighters has not really grown appreciably in the last few years, and it has meant that you guys have had to do substantial amounts of overtime. Does that have an impact on stress?

Mr Jolly: It has a huge impact. There is a perception in the community that firefighters sit around the stations and play cards and darts and that sort of thing. There is a rationale behind those sorts of things. In the days of the fire brigade things were very structured. Stations were close by. There used to be tournaments among different stations. The recreational side of the service was an important factor that is being overlooked at the moment. Recreation brings bonding, mateship and camaraderie with a game of tennis or cards. In the downtime those types of things are all stress releases and you do that amongst stations. For instance, I was at Bassendean for close to 15 years. We would go to a lot of stressful incidents with Midland or Malaga. On a weekend we would tee up a game of tennis so that we could get together and chill out. We were still on call.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What I mean is going back to do overtime and not going home.

Mr Jolly: Absolutely. During the early 2000s, the union was very critical of FESA for running the service down. I would say it was probably the mid-2000s where they were relying on overtime to run the service. Rather than putting on new FTEs, there was a lot of overtime being had. Some of the reports—one from 2007 indicates that firefighters were working up to 90 hours a week. That has a huge impact if you cannot have that downtime. People are always going back to work. It has an effect on the family and the person who is working too much.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: FESA has given evidence—in fact, it has not; rather, it has answered a parliamentary question from me—that it does not keep records of people off sick because of stress. Is that good or bad, and do you think there is merit in having an annual wellness check for all career firefighters?

Ms Anderson: We are quite concerned about elements of the debate around annual testing, particularly compulsory testing versus voluntary testing. What underpins the debate for us is whether members have trust in the system and whether their confidentiality is maintained. Most of our members who have experienced trauma and some who have developed post-traumatic stress are really concerned that if they reveal the full nature of their condition and do not receive the treatment response that is required, they may be pulled out of their job. We have been looking in particular at some of the Canadian models, which do not have compulsory testing but have a very high take-up rate. In the province of Alberta, they have a fitness, wellness and nutrition program that includes psychological resilience. There is an 80 per cent take-up rate, which we think is extraordinary. There are a lot of early diagnoses. We know that we have members who are being treated for post-traumatic stress who are in operational fire defence and who are managing their condition very well. We often say to people that if they develop asthma as a result of their exposure to smoke through their employment, they would not hesitate to identify that as an issue and to have treatment. They should not be reluctant to identify the development of a psychological condition or any of the resulting physical manifestations that occasionally go with the syndrome. They should receive treatment and support. They are reluctant, partly because it is a male–dominated industry and within our broader society men find it more difficult to identify illnesses in that range of condition. Hopefully, that is improving. There is a fear that comes from a lack of trust and that takes us into the series of case studies that we could put before you. In our opinion, FESA has not identified the fact that post-traumatic stress underpins disciplinary problems or grievance issues. In the last five years 99 per cent of grievance and disciplinary matters that have required union intervention or assistance have involved post-traumatic stress. That is no exaggeration. I will hand back to Kevin, who will talk about a very recent disciplinary matter.

Mr Jolly: We raised concerns with the authority in regards to a very serious disciplinary matter. It was not the first time this person had got into trouble. It was what we would term an uncharacteristic outburst or what seemed to be a very emotional set of circumstances. We did say to the authority that we believed the person was showing all the signs of having some form of critical incident stress. It was totally discounted. They are the concerns we have. It goes back to the question asked at the start about whether FESA is adequate in its management of it.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Presumably, that compounds the whole issue.

Mr Jolly: Even when it is highlighted to FESA that this person had enormous stress in his life and that we needed to evaluate that and perhaps offer help and those sorts of things, it was only ever interested in the discipline and not the set of circumstances surrounding that.

Mr Martinelli: If I may, we actually pushed that part of the rehabilitation that he have more than one or one and a half day anger management to try to deal with the post-incident stress. It took a while for them to take that on board. All they were concerned about was giving a fine and doing the normal disciplinary side without trying to assist the employee with the underpinning reason that he was so angry and damaged—that is what it is.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: In relation to that and coming back to what Kevin said about peer support, this is an issue that peers would see before management. We had evidence recently where someone in authority downplayed—in my opinion—the role of peer support, but he qualified it by saying that people wanted peer support from people who were still in the job with them and not retired people. I would like to have that qualified, because if peer support worked like it should—I am a believer of peer support—that is where it should have been first flagged. He should have got his support from there. Can you describe the role of peer support and what you think about the retirees who come in—if that is a good word for them. It is used elsewhere. Other retirees come in as volunteers and apparently the people who are on the job have responded to those volunteers coming in.

Mr Jolly: What is crucial about peer support is trust. That is the fundamental of people opening up. It is very hard to get very proud people—even now it is still seen as a weakness. If someone has

those sorts of issues, they still see it as a weakness. There is a range of reasons for this, such as a promotion, to fit in—there is a whole range of those things. Peer supporters must be very, very good at being a people person. They have to have the trust of the shift. It is a difficult thing to try to manage. Every station profile is different. Some will have a lot of junior firefighters; others will have a lot of senior firefighters. Then there are the dynamics within the shifts themselves. It is not easy to quantify and to come up with solutions. I will pick a person at the moment we have within the service, a senior firefighter who is a welfare officer within FESA. He has an enormous amount of trust within the membership and the employees within the firefighter ranks. That has been built up over time. He has had 34 or 35 years in the service. He is well known, well liked and trusted. Most importantly, he is confidential—he will not talk to anyone about any matter that is not of that particular concern.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the training provided by FESA to new staff deal with stress and trauma? How does FESA do it in comparison with other states?

Ms Anderson: We probably cannot speak with any authority. We can take the comparison with other jurisdictions on notice and do a bit of research for you. In our view, the 1.5 hours that the recruits receive, the additional 1.5 hours of training that station officers receive at that level and a further 1.5 hours that is provided to senior officers is woefully inadequate. One of the issues that concerns the union is how we can best work with the employer to build resilience. We have a work hardening program that assists with commonly occurring physical injuries. For example, if it has been observed over time that a lot of firefighters have shoulder injuries—it is common work to have to drag a heavy hose—the work hardening program is part of the daily physical education and will include tailored exercises to help that. We would like to see some work done—not just an outside consultant at great expense, but some genuine resourcing within FESA to support building resilience for the sort of stress associated with that that people can develop as a result of their exposure to trauma. It is one of the areas that we want further resourced. We would like to see more personnel in the welfare unit and, in particular, as I think we said earlier, we can see the value and improvement in FESA's services since the two uniformed officers went into the welfare branch. We also want our welfare unit protected. It comes under enormous pressure from time to time to do other jobs that place them directly in conflict with their welfare role. Recently, a senior civilian director insisted that one of the uniformed officers investigate an OSH matter. He did not want to do it. He raised his concerns, but he was directed to do that work. A district officer overseeing the OSH investigation told him that he had a conflict between that and his welfare role. We do not want to see our welfare people compromised because that contributes to a lack of trust which is crucial, as Kevin just said.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you explain the welfare unit? You said there is a chaplain, two uniformed officers and a psychologist. That is four people.

Ms Anderson: Yes. Not discounting the volunteers, who we do have concerns about and who our people work alongside, there are 1 400 approximately full–time equivalent employees of FESA. We do not think that that is enough.

The CHAIRMAN: We can assume what the role of the chaplain and psychologist involves. What is the role of the uniformed officers?

Ms Anderson: Both of them have received welfare training. It varies enormously. In some instances the individual or the crew may prefer to speak to someone in uniform because they do not have to explain some things to them. In other instances they may initiate contact and talk to crews, particularly after difficult fires or road accidents. They may go out. It varies. They have an open plan office. They work very closely together and it appears to us that they manage the slight differences between their roles very well. They work collaboratively and maintain confidentiality. Quite often we ring them to say that we have concerns and they tell us that they are aware of the

situation. They do not necessarily contact us unless they believe there is some form of assistance that the union needs to provide.

The CHAIRMAN: We heard from three former police officers last week who went through the incidents that caused their particular issues. What sorts of issues do fireys come up against specifically that causes them this kind of stress?

Mr Martinelli: They are varying; from fires, obviously death through to fire asphyxiation and burning, which can be fairly horrific, the different forms the body takes through that time of exposure. Then we get into road, rail or truck traffic. With vehicle accidents it is dismemberment or a complete explosion. It is all very traumatic for the firefighter. When you first arrive—I am a 30-year veteran—you just do your job. It is not until after the job occurs that you have time to think about it. That is where the station profile initially, the station officer and three fireys, will go back and have a debrief, if you like, to the point where in the early days it was a satirical–type debrief. It would be black humour or whichever way you could talk about it. It was seen as a weakness to show your emotion. As you can see, it brings up emotion for me. You talk to your crew and try to deal with it there. A lot of times you just bury it. It does not surface until well after you have done—in my case it has been 30 years. It has never worried me until now. It is coming back, and I do not know why. Probably because we did not have the ability to—we had a psychologist. We had an incident. I was a volunteer at Wundowie and a guy was killed on the track—he was competing—and he took his throat out. FESA sent out a psych. But the psych just did not get it. He just did not get it. We went back in our group and tried to debrief as best we could losing a close friend. My point there is that the initial group of firefighters and station officers debriefing is good. Having a welfare department with uniform that also get it—you can talk to them. The biggest issue I have had in 30 years—and why I have not spoken to most of the FESA people—is that we do not have any trust. That is evident in a couple of issues where something has been said in confidence and we will hear it through our union, through the back door, that guys are talking it. It should never have got that way. The trust and confidentiality does not occur. That is the biggest issue that every department has in trying to deal with post-incident stress.

The CHAIRMAN: You have mentioned debriefing, and there is a bit of a debate going on around the world at the moment about the psychological first aid approach. Have you been involved in that debate or kept up with that debate?

Ms Anderson: Certainly, we are reading about it and talking within the union nationally. We are concerned that a lot of additional resources will go in immediately after an event, whether that is a terrible fire or car accident or whether it is a major disaster. It is obvious to us that post-traumatic stress is not always triggered immediately after an event; it depends. If you look at the rates of psychological health and suicide in the broader community, even after the recent Queensland floods, you will see the first spike is usually about six months after the disaster, and then there are continuing problems. The resourcing needs to be constant; it needs to lift and it needs to be constant. It is not either/or—we probably need both. But it is not enough to just pour resources into the immediate debrief; that is a part of the solution. Equally, peer support is part of the solution. One of the issues that we are concerned about with regard to peer support is that because of a system of dispersed relieving—this is the scattering of relievers across the metropolitan area; the union is on the record as having opposed that model—following up personnel who have attended a tragic incident becomes so much harder if there are a number of relievers who are not based within a constant crew who are being monitored and supported by their peers. You may remember the very tragic fire at Carabooda where we lost two young girls. There were a high number of relievers who attended that incident across a range of stations. We identified that almost immediately as we were talking to our people in the first couple of days and so did welfare. Welfare went to great lengths to ensure that they set up systems to be able to track both the relieving station officers and the relieving firefighters. That constancy is actually quite important. That is part of the informal response, I suppose.

Mr Jolly: Just to clarify what Lea is saying about relief, she is talking about relief staff that do not have a fire station where they can actually belong. So they are transient; they put all their gear in the boot of their car and they go into Perth in the morning and a district officer appoints them to, say, Bassendean for a week and then the next week they might go to Malaga or they might go to Fremantle. They are never in one place for any long period of time. They have a sense of not belonging.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So they are particularly vulnerable or at risk.

Mr Jolly: They are very vulnerable, because they are young, they are usually new in the job, they have no sense of hope because they cannot see that they are going to get a fire station and be part of a team, but they are thrown from pillar to post. They can see just as much trauma as any other seasoned firefighter but still have no station officer and no buddy, if you like, to look after them and have a chat. So the next week they are somewhere else.

The CHAIRMAN: So what is your preference for relief, because obviously there has to be relief?

Mr Jolly: As you may be aware, we had a centralised system where the Perth fire station that is in Hay Street had the capacity to hold all those relievers. They had a house; they had an ownership there. The union is on the record, when the dispersed relieving model was put out, that we believe you still need to have satellite stations—one in the north, one in the south and perhaps one central or one in the east—so they have enough capacity in them to house these relievers and give them a home so they can form those relationships.

[10:15 am]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: One of the things that have come out of our inquiries in relation to disasters is the need to get personnel off the front line after a certain time—eight hours or whatever. I was just wondering, in terms of, say, the Perth or Margaret River fires, was that done there? Were people taken off at eight hours or were your officers going longer?

Mr Jolly: That was pretty haphazard down there. People were told to go to hotels and they had no idea where they were going and what they were doing. In a lot of respects, they went to hotels to sleep because there was nowhere else to go, only then to be told, "No, you're needed back at the fire ground." It was very disjointed in those things. Some people got down there and then were told, "Oh, you're not required; you can go back to Perth." So there were deployments made. They got down there ready to do work and then told to go back to Perth.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So what you are saying is that there was really no tracking of individuals and how long they had been on the front line.

Mr Jolly: No.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Did that happen with the Perth hills? Were people working longer —

Mr Jolly: Absolutely.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So they were out there longer than eight hours.

Mr Jolly: Yes.

Mr Martinelli: If I may, the managers can be asked to do 24 hours straight, which is ridiculous. They are managing the fatigue of those firefighters below them, whilst they are tired and should be rested. We had the same issue with the crews that do not get relief for whatever reason—they are too far into the job to allow them to come out for the relief to go in, there is no civilian access to get them in or out, they cannot leave because there are not enough staff for them to be replaced, or there are not enough pumps or trucks or whatever for them to be replaced. All those issues compound. From my experience, I had the Wundowie fires, the first lot and the second lot, and the hills. It is not uncommon to do 12 or 14 hours straight on the fire ground. The reality is that the guys are not

getting the relief. Then, of course, that compounds the family issues when they get home; it all compounds and creates a problem.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: One of the issues that came out of the Perth hills fire was that the policy was saving people, not property. I imagine some of your members would have been in a position where they would have been confronting members of the public who were concerned that their properties were about to burn down and your members were having to say, "Sorry, sir; Sorry, madam. We can't do it." That must generate enormous stress.

Mr Jolly: Absolutely. Whether I was lucky or unlucky, I was on holiday. I guess I was lucky; I did not go. But I would have liked to have been there. My crew went. On the day that that happened my crew from Bassendean went to Roleystone. When I came back from my holiday, they were traumatised. It was just the things they were saying to me. They said that it was most unusual to drive past houses on fire with residents yelling, "Come and put my house out." They would have to pick a house that they believed they could save and leave one that they could not save, and then while they were setting up to put out a house, people were crying and coming up to them and begging them to put their house out. That is the experience of a firefighter—to look at a house and say, "We're not going to put that out; we'll just have to leave it." The stress on those guys was enormous.

The CHAIRMAN: How does that get dealt with, because obviously there is anger in the community as well?

Mr Jolly: Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN: I think next week or in two weeks' time we are down in Margaret River hopefully to talk to some of the firefighters and find out what that experience has been like for them. How does the union or FESA try to deal with that?

Mr Jolly: What I do and what I did with my crew is sat down and we talked about it and tried to put some rationale behind it and basically reinforce that what they did was right. I think that fundamentally that is a big issue with our volunteers—that they never get recognition. They are out there in the wilderness doing all these things for the community and no-one ever pats them on the back. No-one goes to the station straight after what they have done and says, "You did a fantastic job." They do not get it enough. I used to do a lot of volunteer training and I used to hear first-hand the things that they used to say. One that comes to mind is the cliff collapse down in Margaret River at Gracetown. I was down there doing breathing apparatus training probably two months after that happened and the trauma that was in that firehouse down there was enormous. I did not leave that station until about four o'clock in the morning, listening and just congratulating them on what they did.

The CHAIRMAN: Wayne Gregson is the new FESA chief at the moment. What is the one thing that he could do to help the psychological welfare and get rid of this macho image of the firefighter?

Mr Jolly: I believe it is slowly changing. I can see a slow change, but we need to put ownership into these areas. We need to put people who have the skills and not just select people because they want a promotion. Sometimes you have to handpick people to run departments who have the clout and the knowledge and the compassion to run those departments and not move them around. There seems to be this ideology that is creeping in, and I think it could be a police service mentality, that we have to rotate people around for their common good. Sometimes I think some people are that good at a particular job that they need to stay there. What they do is they mentor and they grow those departments. That is vitally important when you have got good people or senior people who can actually mentor and bring people on; that is what we need.

Mr Martinelli: If I may, I think also he could champion both retirees and senior firefighter station officers and get them as mentors.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: That is one thing I was going to ask, Frank. I know the union has a pretty close relationship with your retired officers. We have talked to people overseas where the retired firefighters come in as peer support. That would be a system that you would support here?

Ms Anderson: We certainly would, but one of the other things I would like to draw to your attention is that, quite uniquely, the industry of firefighting has very limited career path opportunities. You either seek promotion or eventually you have to come off the back of the trucks. We frequently see a lot of experience and expertise and industry knowledge wasted because, in our view, people retire prematurely. If they do not necessarily want to do desk work or they do not want to seek promotion, we can see a role for some of those personnel in providing peer support and mentoring. People's capacity to mentor goes beyond the rank structure. It is important that mentors come from all ranks because not only do firefighters and station officers require it, but so do our senior officers. I think there needs to be a flexible approach. We should not focus completely on volunteers and the retired members; they certainly have a role. But we also need to identify how best to use some of the expertise and experience that is leaching out of the system because there are so few career opportunities for firefighters.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I ask you about the employee assistance scheme? What is your view of that and how it works?

Ms Anderson: Mostly it seems to work quite well. We have not had any recent complaints relating to concerns around confidentiality. The most significant complaint we have had around that issue came from a member in a country town where the referral had to go to someone locally because travelling to Perth for that sort of counselling was inappropriate. There were some issues. I believe that the employer changed the preferred service provider in that particular area. My understanding is that members and their direct family members can receive up to six appointments without question annually. If there is a need for additional appointments, either the EAP service provider can put that request back to the employer or welfare can put that request in.

The CHAIRMAN: Who is the service provider?

Ms Anderson: There are two. One of them is in a counselling service down the road. It may be Centrecare that is further down Hay Street. I am sorry; I can come back to you with that information.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned earlier—I think you mentioned the Queensland floods—that probably six months later you get a spike in suicides and family issues. Do we have any knowledge in WA about when we get spikes? Are firefighters more prone to divorce?

Ms Anderson: Yes. Certainly family breakdown possibly, unfortunately, is higher than it is within the police service, and it is high in the police service as well. And even in FESA's submission, I think they acknowledge we have got one of the highest rates of workers' compensation notification for stress in Australia. Quite often we will get calls from a station to say, "You need to give a legal referral to someone about family law, but can you give them a ring?" So we do talk to them. We talk to them about counselling, we talk to them about focusing on the needs of their children, and we try to identify if there are any underlying triggers and whether the situation is irretrievable. It is not really a legalistic approach; it is more of a holistic approach, and I think that that is necessary.

The CHAIRMAN: The firefighters' union is pretty strong in the service.

Ms Anderson: We are 99.7 per cent organised.

The CHAIRMAN: So you are 100 per cent organised, basically. The relationship of the union and FESA: is that a harmonious one? Is it a cooperative one or is it a head-to-head one?

Mr Jolly: It has not been. I would say it has improved; yes, it has improved.

Ms Anderson: You asked us a question earlier about FESA under the leadership of Wayne Gregson. It is our view that by the time we got to the very formal stage of the recent disciplinary

matter where we appealed part of the outcome to Mr Gregson, and even at the earlier stage when we were before the chief officer, Lloyd Bailey, as part of our member's response to the charges that he faced, he identified that he would willingly participate in counselling, and I think under Mr Gregson's leadership the organisation went, "Yes. That's great." What disappointed us about that was that that problem, which was essentially a matter of insubordination and an inappropriate and very angry response to an issue on a fire ground, was not mediated more effectively. And, if I may, with regard to those sorts of disciplinary matters and grievance matters, we have to be very careful. The senior officers need to be understanding of these issues, but they cannot confuse their roles. It was really disturbing for us a couple of years ago. In a matter in regional WA, a very senior officer with responsibility for country fire made terribly disparaging comments about our member's workers' compensation history, and this bloke has subsequently medically retired. Instead of understanding that that may have had an impact on the matter that was investigated, the senior officer's comments were, in our view, outrageous and unwarranted, and showed a lack of empathy and understanding. We do not support insubordination. We certainly do not support confrontation on a fire ground, but we do believe those matters can be better dealt with with a more holistic framework, and that requires professional expertise primarily from within a welfare unit. Again, it comes back to confidentiality and trust being balanced against all the other needs of the organisation.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: The union is on the record as supporting presumptive legislation in relation to firefighters contracting cancer, but in some overseas jurisdictions presumptive legislation also covers post-traumatic stress. So I am wondering if the union has any views about whether ultimately, whenever we get some presumptive legislation, it should be maybe extended to post-traumatic stress.

Ms Anderson: The problem for us is not so much whether or not there is a presumption in these matters, because it does not matter if there is a presumption or there is not; the limit that our members face with regard to their treatment is the workers' compensation limit. We currently have several members who are in the system, some of whom may return to operational duty and some who will, we think, medically retire, who have exhausted the workers' compensation support for the treatment that they require. In one member's matter, the insurer has made a recommendation that they extend the coverage so that the member can access what appears to be a very effective, but terribly expensive, program. That program is run out of Hollywood hospital. It starts off, I think, with a two-week residential component, and then it continues for 18 weeks and is offered at a cost of $30 000 a head. Now, you would be aware from your understanding of workers' compensation legislation that there is a limit to how much money can be spent on treatment and how much money can be spent on income support. The issue for us is not so much around presumption; it is how expensive the treatment is and how long a person may require treatment, because there is definite evidence within our retired firefighter ranks of the need for support and counselling and treatment. We have got lots of retired members who are very damaged.

[10.30 am]

Mr Jolly: Just to touch on that, I think the model that the military use is probably a very good model. It is recognised and, as I said, when our peer support program started up in the late 1980s, we had a lot of Vietnam veterans who went through a lot of trauma. I do not think we have any left in the service now. By the mid-1990s most of them had gone. So the model of the military, even though back when those Vietnam veterans returned it was not in vogue, it certainly is now. I have got relatives and friends who have been to Afghanistan, and they certainly get on-the-job consults as well as follow-ups when they get back, so it is done very well for. And, also, they have the packages when they actually get out of their service.

Ms Anderson: A gold card.

Mr Jolly: Yes, like a gold card. I know that is beyond this committee, but certainly at a federal level I think firefighters do a very similar service to military personnel in serving the country, and that, to me, is probably where the union, anyway, would like to see benefits heading.

Mr Martinelli: If I may on the Hollywood hospital, I think there are four firefighters in there at the moment—three or four firefighters,

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What is the program called?

Ms Anderson: I cannot think of the name now, but I will come back to you with the name of the program.

Mr Martinelli: And one of those is actually paying his own way because of trust issues with FESA, perhaps getting back to the point. We do not know who it is and we should not know who it is, but there is a firefighter in there at the moment who is paying his own way through his own wages just to stay in the job because of the trust issues.

Mr Jolly: And they do not want to be put out of the job. They love it too much.

Mr Martinelli: That is where they are. And also, speaking about retired returned [inaudible] is running a program, it has got two DEC properties up north [inaudible] He obviously went overseas in Vietnam, and he is saying that he predicts, with what he has seen through the fireys, the coppers and other services, that the trauma from fire and rescue or from firefighters is going to increase and overtake the numbers of post-traumatic stress that they got from Vietnam. That is his view at the moment and the way he is dealing with people coming through and talking to him compared to what he had dealt with with his crew. So that was rather interesting.

The CHAIRMAN: We have had correspondence with [inaudible] just recently.

Ms Anderson: Good.

The CHAIRMAN: We have not taken it any further just yet because it was in the last week, so we will see how we can deal with that. I am conscious of the time, and we have somebody else to come in. Are there any closing remarks you would like to make? Is there anything that we have missed that you would like to have on the record?

Mr Jolly: I have done 27 years—over 21 as a station officer and six years as a firefighter. In 1985 when I joined the service it was discussed that you will see things that not a lot of people see, and they try and condition you for that, but there is no training that can actually condition you for what you see over your career, and there is no one thing that is actually a trigger for everyone. I have seen lots and lots of different reactions over my time—hundreds—from lots of different people, some that you would not expect; elderly senior firefighters who go to one incident, and something they see just triggers a whole raft of memories. I have heard of other people who have just been driving down the road and witnessed a scene that had happened a week ago, and obviously some of the remnants were still on the road, and there were flowers and memorials built on the side of the road that triggered a response or an emotion from them. Trying to sum it up, from my own aspects, I originally had nightmares about going to traffic accidents when I was a lot younger, and would wake up in a sweat, and I had not even witnessed any. It was just, I guess, that expectation that I was going to go to one. I was training on a vehicle, because we only had one vehicle that used to go to car accidents in those days. None of the fire trucks—they still went to the accidents, but they did not have rescue gear. So this particular truck that was in Perth fire station, you had to be at least a three-year firefighter to be trained on that, and we used to take about two months to train fully on the vehicle. In the midst of me training on that vehicle and going through all the things, going to the wrecking yards, cutting up cars, going down wells—we used to do a raft of various drills—I ended up waking up in the middle of the night in a nightmare with what I had envisaged in my head, and I had not even been to a crash. It was quite disturbing. So to try and answer some of the questions and say what causes it, what triggers—everyone is different. I do not think you can psychologically analyse people to select people to join the service, because people deal with things in different

ways. I have seen massively disfigured people, people caught in machinery, people trapped under cars, bodies twisted into liquorice sticks—all sorts of things—limbless, headless et cetera. The worst one that sticks in my mind is a house fire, where I had to resuscitate an 18-month-old baby. The skin was peeling off the body—the only bit of skin that could stay on the body was where the nappy was—and the black in the mouth and in the nose, and those visions stay with you. So, as strange as it sounds, a house fire I did not think would affect me as much as it has. Car accidents and all those things, and people dying on you when you are trying to get them out, is not a good thing. It is a raft of things that you see, and I cannot put a finger or an idea on what actually triggers it. Some people take 30 years, 35 years before they have had enough, and others five years, and they have to get out. I have seen people get to five years in the job and they have just had to leave because they could not deal with it any more.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I thank you all for coming in this morning and for your honesty with the committee and can I thank you for the job that you do out there. I do recognise that, to say the least, it is difficult. It is a very difficult job to do, so I thank you for doing that.

I will just read you a closing statement so you know exactly what happens from here on. Again, thanks for your evidence before the committee this morning. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Could you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period, we will deem it to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, can you please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Again, thanks very much for coming in this morning.

The Witnesses: Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 10.38 pm