



TOT sub 13

**Inquiry into the recognition and adequacy of the responses by State Government agencies to experience of trauma by workers and volunteers arising from disasters**

Community Development and Justice Standing Committee at its meeting on 17 August 2011 resolved to conduct an Inquiry with the following terms of reference:

With a focus on State Government workers and volunteers who work with, or under the supervision of, State Government agencies which are involved in emergency responses, the Committee will examine:

- \* whether existing agency responses adequately address the trauma experienced by staff and volunteers during and after declared natural disasters which have occurred since 2001;
- \* the barriers to those suffering trauma from accessing available assistance services; and
- \* the measures to mitigate any health impacts from trauma to those State Government workers and volunteers who responded to a declared disaster

[http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(InqByName\)/Inquiry+into+the+recognition+and+adequacy+of+the+responses+by+State+Government+agencies+to+experience+of+trauma+by+workers+and+volunteers+arising+from+disasters?opendocument](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(InqByName)/Inquiry+into+the+recognition+and+adequacy+of+the+responses+by+State+Government+agencies+to+experience+of+trauma+by+workers+and+volunteers+arising+from+disasters?opendocument)

02/05/2012 10:00 AM MR4 SES Volunteers Phillip Petersen  
Association (Inc) ESM

Legislative Assembly Committee Rooms, Level 1/11 Harvest Tce,  
West Perth

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**Phillip Petersen ESM** I am a SES volunteer with almost 30 years SES experience. My experience includes road accident rescue, search, as a volunteer in WA country and metro area's, being a local manager of a metro unit, a trainer in a range of skills and president of our association for 10 years.

I am representing the State Emergency Service Volunteers Association (SESVA), an advocacy body representing SES volunteers in WA.



## **An over view of Peer Support in SES**

A search for a young boy, Jabor Labasey, in Kwinana in December 1990 resulting in the finding of the missing boy buried after being murdered was the catalyst for peer support within SES. The circumstance and volunteers exposure to the traumatised family and constantly wailing mother deeply affected all the searchers.

In what is marked as a first in SES, a diffusing meeting was consequently (about a week later) held at the Mandogrup Community Hall. It is known that one Local Manager felt the need and held a diffusing gathering immediately afterwards at his home (using his life experience skills- Salvation Army and National Service). He later was one of the first groups of Peer Supporters trained.

The SES was a sub department of the Police at that time. A team made up of SES staff, SES volunteers and the Police Occupational Therapist (Olive Roy) introduced the concept of peer support into SES. The first training course was conducted in November 1991, starting with 12-14 students led by a clinical psychologist (Michael Tunnecliffe). Whilst the concept was not fully supported by the then SES director at the time, he did not oppose the formation of "peer support" into the SES. This eventually took the form of some SES staff and volunteers throughout all regions undertaking a 4 day course. Only those who wished to be part peer support and other prerequisite life experience undertook the training.

The peer support process concept was having volunteers and staff skilled in diffusion (individually or as a group) and trained to identify volunteers or staff who had a situation that needed escalation to professional assistance.

The "Peer Support" system acquired SES director's support as result of Grace Town tragedy in September 1996 when a collapsing cliff killed 9 school children whilst watching a surfing competition. The director actively involved the peer support team as result of local SES volunteer's involvement.



**Today's situation** Today the peer support system is an accepted practice by SES volunteers. The subject is covered in SES Induction and also in appropriate training courses, such as search, cliff rescue and road crash rescue.

However it is a perception of members in the current SES Peer Support Team that FESA is not supporting the volunteer peer support system in the same way it has in the past. This perception is based on:

- Limited or no currency training being readily available;
- No training or active recruitment of new volunteers to the team;
- Lack of callouts to volunteer peer support team in recent years;
- FESA is not actively promoting SES peer Support system;
- That the system is currently called Employee Assistance Program (EAP) in FESA submission and associated FESA processes appear to be staff focused.

The association (SESVA) is aware of a couple who has applied for peer support training but has not had any feedback/ response from FESA.

This is giving the perception that FESA Chaplaincy and Welfare branch are not really interested in supporting the SES Peer Support system and are more focused on career firepersons. You could also gain this perception from the FESA written submission where no mention of SES is mentioned in the first half of submission and an only few comments in the later part of the submission. In addition the FESA submission states a strategic change to peer support program resulting in a reduced support in 2006 (p4).

However, it is generally accepted amongst SES volunteers that having experienced peer supporters within the volunteer ranks is a good practice. It is the volunteers' belief that this diffuses situations in the CIS stage, thus preventing issues of the next stage being post traumatic stress syndrome. This can be supported by some case studies.

The changes made by FESA in the past few years are supposedly due to compliance to a Work Safe Plan Safety Management System Audit in 2009. It is likely the audit did not cover SES Peer Support System (as there is no SES Peer Support Team recall of any involvement into this investigation). The association (SESVA) is not aware of any of the outcomes ever been being discussed with volunteers in a meaningful way.



# SES VOLUNTEERS ASSOCIATION

The association (SESVA) has a current perception that FESA has developed a practice of limiting/dominating communication. That FESA may well consider a presentation to some limited volunteer audiences as acceptance and a right of way to whatever course the FESA executive team has chosen.

**The association acknowledges the need for trauma counseling and education for career and volunteer emergency service workers. We also support the SES volunteers' opinion, which is an intervention system that includes their own empathic peer support volunteers supported by a team of professionals including FESA welfare branch, the medical system and insurance.**



## Case studies

**Craig Sandy death**, Bush fire Lancelin, September 2008 A SES volunteer, a SES peer supporter and a wife of an SES volunteer found that a peer Support Session conducted by a FRS Peer Supporter beneficial after the death of Craig Sandy death. There was concern that her husband may have been involved in the accident.

**A troubled SES volunteer** A longtime SES volunteer and local manager was identified as needing peer support. In this case the person had been involved in a number of impacts in his life including, the pressures of a marriage breakdown, issues at his employment and a abseiling incident involving a death, the volunteer found himself in a breakdown situation and seriously thinking of suicide as a solution. However contact with his unit's peer supporter had him on an escalated path to a specialist doctor and a path to wellness. The idea of contacting an EAP (whether it was through his own employer or FESA) did not enter his head in that dark time.

**A road accident** A SES volunteer encountered a road accident with a hysterical mother over the death of her 3-4 year old boy. The volunteer, a mother herself, found the situation overwhelming and engaged the fire peer support and found this beneficial. She also identifies good communication with her husband (an experienced motor sport rescuer) as a positive factor. The tables were reversed when he was involved in the recovery of Peter Brock's body from the accident scene. He had no peer support system and relied on an understanding wife to help him through.

**Yvette Mitchell search** A Field Search Controller was conducting a search for Yvette Mitchell. Foul play was suspected. She was relieved to know that she had two trained SES peer supports within the search teams. It was a relief to her that a CIS debrief could be pulled together quickly if required rather than waiting for someone from FESA who had no empathy with the situation. It was felt that having unobtrusive peer supporters was a bonus to the operation. In other SES incidents such as car accidents, suicides, bombs, or forensic searches she was aware of SES volunteers being exposed to CIS and not having immediate diffusing debriefs having led to marriage breakdown and alcoholism. When people are in this situation, they are not likely to seek EAP help.



## **Cyclone George**

Antidotal evidence indicates that there was an incident of a FESA career officer was traumatised and unable to contribute to the operation. Fortunately experienced SES volunteers were able to be proactive at the mining camp disaster, including setting up a medical drip system for paramedics and assisting with evacuation of miners. This indicates that trauma is not limited to volunteers.

## **Life skills and some appreciation training**

A senior unit member with life skills and some appreciation training had identified unit members that required Peer support. It is believed this story could be repeated several times.

## **Employer pressure**

I am personally aware of employer pressure to volunteers. Direct and implied pressure generates personal conflict within the volunteer. This could be repeated by many private employers to SES volunteers. I am also aware that similar experiences are shared by Reserve Military volunteers. There are a few socially responsible employers and state government agencies that do allow volunteers to undertake response to emergency situations.

## **Search in Geraldton, 1999**

A search of 3 days for girl ended with her body found on the beach. She had been murdered. FESA dispatched one volunteer SES peer supporter and one person from FESA Welfare Branch. The observation made by a FESA\_SES staff person (himself a trained Peer Supporter and qualified psychologist) reports that the intervention was very effective with the volunteers. That they were available for 1.5 days to allow volunteers hold private sessions was deemed as beneficial.

## **Marine search Derby 199X**

The SES volunteers had been searching for a missing man in the waterways at Derby. The missing person, himself a SES volunteer, disappeared when he dived into the water attempting to save his child who had fallen overboard. His body was found by his SES colleagues and had been mauled by a crocodile. A SES staffer who was a trained Peer Supporter and qualified psychologist was dispatched to provide CSI intervention. During the intervention, he identified one of the volunteers as potentially suicidal, not from the incident, but from other life issues. He was able to provide circumvent a potential tragedy.