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Via email: lcpac@parliament.wa.gov.au

Standing Committee on Public Administration
Parliament House
4 Harvest Tce
WEST PERTH WA 6005

SUBMISSION TO THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE DELIVERY OF AMBULANCE SERVICES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the Delivery of Ambulance Services in Western Australia.

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is an independent, membership based organisation representing and supporting the work and interests of 139 Local Governments in Western Australia. WALGA provides an essential voice for over 1,200 Local Government Elected Members, approximately 14,500 employees and over 2.5 million constituents of Local Government in Western Australia.

Noting the very short timeframe provided for making a submission to the Inquiry WALGA has been unable to undertake a comprehensive consultation process. However a number of regional Local Governments have considered the Inquiry Terms of Reference and provided feedback which is summarised below. It should be noted that this feedback relates to regional ambulance services only.

Local Governments, including Shire of Lake Grace, Shire of Mt Marshall and Shire of Carnamah, have expressed support for the current volunteer based ambulance system in regional Western Australia. There is concern that if the service were to be taken over by the State Government it would impact negatively on the level of service for regional communities due to:

- The potential for a reduction in service levels particularly in the smaller, more remote communities.
- If a government owned or run service was to move away from the use of volunteers there would be a need to employ a significant number of people to replace them. In many areas across regional Western Australia this would not be feasible and may lead to a reduction in ambulance numbers and service capacity.
- The potential for services to be moved from local sub-centres and placed in larger regional towns; essentially removing the only medical service that many of the regional areas have nearby. This has the potential to significantly increase response times and reduce service levels.

The current ambulance service delivery model in regional areas, which relies heavily on volunteer services, provides an effective service for regional communities, particularly where there are no alternative medical facilities. It seems the most significant barrier in healthcare is when a patient is transferred to the nearest country health facilities where there is often inadequate services and staffing levels to support the patient; not the ambulance service itself. In this context the Shire of Carnamah highlights that additional resources are required to improve the overall outcome for improved health services in regional WA, not just within St Johns, but also within the WA Country Health Services and Royal Flying Doctor service models.

Any change to the ambulance service in regional areas has the potential to have a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of people within these communities. Many towns in regional Western Australia are already finding it difficult to attract people to live and work. Having a diminished medical support system would make this even harder.

In many country towns, volunteering is an important contributor to community connectedness. If the ambulance service were to move away from the use of volunteers in regional areas it would reduce volunteering opportunities, with potentially negative social impacts. Any changes to the ambulance service should protect and enhance the ethos that attracts volunteers. At the same time, changing demographic patterns and an ageing population means that in some areas there will be difficulty in attracting ambulance volunteers in the future. For these places a hybrid model of volunteers and career ambulance personnel may be appropriate. Additional State Government support for ambulance volunteer attraction and recruitment, training and retention in regional areas is recommended.

There is also a concern, that if the service was to be taken over by the State Government, there would be a push to move to a model where Local Governments would be required to manage the volunteer service, similar to volunteer Bush Fire Brigades, which would not be supported.

As a result of Government policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic tourism in Western Australia has increased significantly, particularly to remote locations. This has increased demands on regional health services, including ambulance services. It is submitted that given the interconnected nature of the health care system, the Inquiry consider making recommendations that address resourcing issues currently faced by regional health services including regional hospitals, General Practitioners, other medical and allied health services and the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS).

A number of Local Governments operate airports which are utilised to support patient transfer between ambulance and RFDS. In this way Local Governments are partners in the provision of regional health services.

WALGA welcomes the review of ambulance services to improve health care for all Western Australians, but submits that any changes recommended to the operation or ownership of the service must not negatively impact on regional areas which value the current ambulance system.

Finally, given the importance of ambulance services to regional areas, WALGA recommends that should the Committee decide to hold hearings, these be conducted in the regions to ensure that community stakeholders have the opportunity to provide their views directly.

For further information please contact Susie Moir, Manager Resilient Communities.

Yours sincerely

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President