
Hon. Adele Farina MLC

Member for South West Region



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Hon. Simon O'Brien MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee of Environment and Public Affairs Committee
GPO Box A11
Perth WA 6837

Dear Chairman

Petition No. 86 - St John Ambulance Employee Deaths by Suicide

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in support of Petition No. 86 - St John Ambulance Employee Deaths by Suicide.

Since about 2009, I have received a growing number of representations from current and past St John Ambulance employees, paramedics and volunteers, living in the metropolitan area and in regional WA expressing concern about the way St John Ambulance do business, the business model in which St John Ambulance are required to operate, the stark differences between the way the organisation works in the metropolitan area and in regional WA, lack of adequate training and refresher training to keep skills current, lack of debrief opportunities after attending traumatic incidences, lack of support for paramedics and volunteers experiencing post traumatic stress and the degree of variation between treatments in the metropolitan area and regional WA, pressure to work overtime or additional shifts, lack of relief staff when an officer/paramedic goes on leave, failure to accommodate part time work for female paramedics seeking to return to work after having a child, and failure of management to adequately respond to concerns raised by paramedics and volunteers, to name just a few of the matters that have been raised with me.

In each instance where officers and volunteers have approached me, they have told me about a culture of fear and intimidation within the organisation, explaining that paramedics and volunteers who dare to speak up and raise concerns either within or outside the organisation are subjected to targeted bullying until they are silenced or resign. They are fearful of talking to me and repercussions they believe will follow if it becomes known they have spoken to me. Also, I have been told of records being altered by management to cover up wrong doing or deficiencies within the organisation and instances of cover up where people have died because of an inadequate response by St John Ambulance. These are very serious allegations that demand investigation. Without the evidence to back up these allegations I have been powerless to pursue them further. A Parliamentary Inquiry would provide an opportunity to collect evidence or information in support of these serious allegations.

At a meeting to discuss a number of the concerns raised with me, a senior St John Ambulance officer attempted to intimidate me demanding that I disclose the names

of those officers and volunteers who had spoken to me, the clear implication being the people involved needed to be dealt with by the organisation. Naturally, I refused to provide the information demanded. It was of great concern to me that the senior officer in question, was focused solely on getting the names of the paramedics and volunteers I had spoken with and not on the issues of concern. My research officer was present at the meeting and can confirm this account.

I note for the record that some officers and volunteers I have spoken with, usually but not always in the presence of their superiors, have spoken positively about St John Ambulance, but overwhelmingly concerns of a serious nature have been raised with me.

Based on my experience, what I have been told and the demeanour of the St John Ambulance paramedics and volunteers who have approached me, there appears to be foundation for the claims of a culture of fear and intimidation within the organisation and that 'conflict' or 'problem resolution' is not well managed within the organisation, often resulting in individuals feeling isolated and targeted.

I have been told the problems are systemic, and not isolated.

These problems together with the stress and trauma experienced by officers and volunteers attending incidents where people have been horrifically injured or have died, emotions are highly charged, people are in distress, or officers and volunteers have faced violence are taking a toll on many within the organisation, and due to inadequate systems to support paramedics and volunteers, have resulted in the rising number of suicides.

The Government and the Parliament can no longer ignore or dismiss this matter. The number of suicides within the organisation over the past year is alarming and warrants close investigation.

An investigation of the suicides by the Chief Psychiatrist, as announced by Government in response to calls for an independent inquiry, is inadequate and will not address the matters raised with me or detailed in the petition. Only a full parliamentary inquiry will have the power to consider the broader issues such as the structure of the ambulance service, the resources available for its operation, how the organisation manages conflict resolution and addresses genuine concerns raised by paramedics and volunteers and the supports and counselling offered to paramedics and volunteers throughout the State.

The parameters of the Chief Psychiatrist's investigation are narrow and without a detailed investigation into the St John Ambulance organisation and hearing evidence from current and past employees, paramedics and volunteers, a finding that work pressures contributed or were the principle cause of the suicides is unlikely. Perhaps this is the outcome desired by some, however the Parliament of Western Australia should not accept what has been offered as adequate. The number of suicides, and the number of people raising concerns with me warrants a detailed and substantial inquiry.

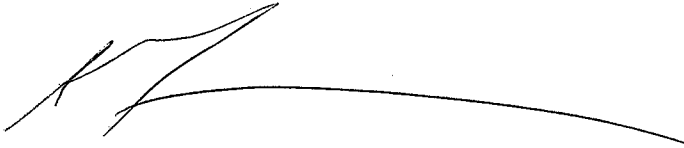
While a Parliamentary Inquiry may not be able to address all of the concerns and allegations raised, it would go some considerable way to addressing these matters and could recommend the referral of particular aspects to other bodies for further investigation.

We ask St John Ambulance to provide a lifesaving service over a very large state on very limited resources. St John Ambulance paramedics and volunteers provide a vital

lifesaving service to our community. We ask a lot of them as professionals and as human beings. At the very least, we owe the paramedics, the volunteers, the organisation itself, and the community we are elected to represent and who rely on this lifesaving service, an ethical responsibility to undertake a thorough and transparent investigation into the suicides and the allegations made.

I urge the Committee to give favourable consideration to a Parliamentary Inquiry to provide transparent and thorough inquiry into the matters raised.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of fluid, connected strokes that form the name 'Adele Farina'.

**Hon. Adele Farina MLC
MEMBER FOR SOUTH WEST REGION**

8 JUN 2015