

**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 BRISBANE
THURSDAY, 5 JULY 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 at 9.26 am

OLIVER, MR JOHN

**State Secretary, United Firefighters' Union Queensland,
282 Montague Road,
West End 4006, examined:**

DONALDSON, MR LUKE

**Research Assistant, United Firefighters' Union Queensland,
127 Fleming Road,
Hemmant 4174, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for coming in this morning. On behalf of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, thank you for agreeing to meet with us today. The purpose of the meeting is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into the recognition and adequacy of the responses by state government agencies to the experience of trauma by workers and volunteers arising from disasters. The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. The committee may look to use information it receives today as part of its deliberations for its final report. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Oliver: Not really.

The CHAIRMAN: John, can you tell us how effective you think the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service procedures are for preparing the State's firefighters and volunteers to deal with the stresses of their jobs and assisting with disasters?

Mr Oliver: I guess it depends on the scale of the disaster. In local level terms you can attend a disaster on the road on the way to work and come across some horrific things, so much so that in smaller towns you can pass every street corner and remember some tragic events. Looking at the major scale things such as the floods that we were exposed to a year and a half ago, I do not believe our response in looking after our firefighters after the event was adequate. I do not believe that the preparation before the event was adequate either.

The CHAIRMAN: What does the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service do to prepare their staff and volunteers for events like that?

Mr Oliver: We basically concentrate on the practical application of our skills in knowing how to deal with different sizes and scales of incidents. In terms of psychological build-up, I do not believe there is any real preparation, except you are told that you may be exposed to this one day or something of this scale, but never, I do not believe, on the scale of what came through Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley during the floods.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: How many members do you have?

Mr Oliver: We have 2,467 members.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: How many would have been involved in the floods?

Mr Oliver: In the south east corner, I believe around 300, off the top of my head. They were involved in different stages. They might be in a room 50 kilometres away from the event or they might be on the front line picking people out of the water.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you learnt any particular lessons from the floods? We are talking about how you are dealing with your staff and volunteers and their psychological health.

Mr Oliver: It became evident pretty early that there were some problems when I was sitting in the office, and as I am an operational firefighter—I am a full-time secretary now—I know a lot of the people who went through these events, and some of them are very experienced firefighters. I believe that they were traumatised either by a lack of support or a perceived lack of support. They started ringing me personally and directly and said to me that this is what happened and they could not believe they did not get the support they should have got. They were asking for it and it was not being received. We have a lot of transcripts in our office. I am not sure whether you have seen them.

When the flood commission was in operation, about 15 guys came into our office and gave their raw data from that day, which is available to you if you want to see it. From the union's point of view, when the information started coming in, it was very raw and emotional and I started to take on a lot of this worry as well. I stood back from it and had some of the other staff go through those transcripts because I would not have been able to manage having all that information and angst, anger and sorrow, and been able to manage it efficiently. From my point of view, I do not think that the guys were prepared to handle anything on that sort of scale.

[9.30 am]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What was the nature of their concerns?

Mr Oliver: Prior to the events that happened in Lockyer Valley, I was getting calls from the floor to say, "Look, we see something coming. There is a lot of rain up here. We have started to do rescues around the area." They were asking for resources and for staff to come in and man the stations. At the time, I believe, they set up what we call "auxiliary stations" or "retained stations", with part-timers, who never really had the experience or technical knowledge to deal with those sorts of incidents. I believe that it could have been a bit of a money issue if they were calling in overtime for people to man the trucks who were professional firefighters who were trained in swift-water rescues to the level that they needed to be. We have different levels of rescue technicians. They were asking and screaming for resources, and they do not feel that they got it that day or in the days leading up to it.

The CHAIRMAN: Was their stress more about the lack of resources coming in or was there stress about the fact that they were not properly prepared for what they might see or the rescues they might have to be called out to?

Mr Oliver: It was a combination of both. The first time when you get exposed to something of that scale is when you are the first one in there or going into there. They saw the elements that were bearing down on them and were calling for extra resources but no-one could move that quickly to put them into position for them. They were put into positions where they were making decisions and becoming overwhelmed with what was at hand. I will give you one incident that resonates with me. A list of rescues on the day that needed to be performed immediately was given to one officer and I think it might have had about 15 or 20 people calling for help who were in urgent and dire need, and the list was over two and a half hours old and no-one had got there yet. He was actually making decisions about who to save and who to not save, without any real information. He was just saying, "Okay, they are probably gone. The risk of getting guys in there is probably too great. Let's save this person and that person". You might get to the bottom of the list and it might have been, I think from memory, schoolkids who were stuck on a roof.

They are the sorts of decisions that were being made by the junior officers, I guess, on the day on the front line. The transcripts that we have in our office that were made available to the flood commission and *The Courier-Mail* and various other media outlets, when you talk to the reporters and they go through it, they still cannot believe what they have been through. It is quite an amazing series of events.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it similar for your normal everyday events that your officers turn out to? Are they better prepared for those sorts of things, both psychologically —

Mr Oliver: When you do your first day as a fireman—or “firefighter”, as they call us these days—you are green but excited and you do not really have any experience. Your life experience may be okay, because we did not take them too early back then, but you really learn on the job. The first day you are there you could turn up to a major car accident with dead bodies on the road—I will not go into too much detail, but some horrific events—or you may not see that for three years and have time to build on smaller incidents. It depends on the luck of the draw, but from day one you could actually be exposed to some horrific events, and it is cumulative.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Can you describe what system exists? Is there a peer support system, or what currently exists within Queensland?

Mr Oliver: We have a peer support system. That is basically other firefighters who are trained to a minimum level. I think they could use some more training—everyone probably could. Basically, they are the older hands that you ride the trucks with. If you need to have a talk to them about events of the day or whatever, you can do that. It is basically a debriefing with them. Generally you debrief with your whole crew if you have some issues. It might not be a formal sense but you might be sitting around your lunchroom saying, “That was pretty horrific. What do you think? Did you see that the other day?” It is just like we are sitting around now.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Do these peer support people have any additional training?

Mr Oliver: It is very basic training. It is not professional training in any sense of the word. It is basically how to deal with what is coming at them too.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Did you make some submissions to the flood commission about what measures you think should be introduced?

Mr Oliver: We hopped a lot on the front foot and approached the fire service and said, “Look, we’ve got girls and guys out there now who are suffering. They’re not receiving the support that they should be. The union sees that we need to upgrade or do something from in our office at least, because if you guys can’t do it, we’ll do something with it.” So, we pulled on board QUT and we are doing surveys now and working hand in hand with them to identify to what level or depth there are psychological injuries across our membership. A survey has gone out and firefighters are actively participating in that. Firefighters are, I guess, a cagey bunch; they do not like too much of their information going out there. People like to—I will not even go down that path. We are going through those steps at the moment to try to identify if there is a major issue still.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you identified any inappropriate behaviours across the service or across the people that responded?

Mr Oliver: Yes, I have actually.

The CHAIRMAN: What sort of behaviours?

Mr Oliver: Aggression, confusion and I am not sure the term, but they are not trusting of management anymore or they feel unsupportive of management. What I saw in a couple of stations relates to the shift system—A, B, C and D—and there is a bit of angst against the other shifts and a bit of internal fighting. So I have seen a rise in that, but I am also seeing it taper off now; they are starting to calm down a bit. I think that straight after the events they were feeling still in battle mode, I guess.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: John, we received evidence in one situation where domestic violence—for want of a better term—increased during and after a disaster from the people who were heroes during the day and were frustrated often when they got home. Did you have to deal with that or did you see or hear of any of that kind of situation as well?

Mr Oliver: Not specifically, but in general terms I could understand it.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: It would not surprise you.

Mr Oliver: It would not surprise me at all. Your psyche is that you are there, you are going to fix what you can and deal with what you can; there are some things you cannot help. It is a heightened level of protection, I guess, for the community. When you get home, it is back to reality and you have got to pay the bills and have to go shopping, and you think, “I’m on this high level doing what I can and all of a sudden I’m back to normality quickly.” There is, I guess, an attraction in that and when you get back to home again it can confuse you a bit, I guess.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Is there a bit of support for families then in that respect, not only through a disaster but even through the work that you do?

Mr Oliver: I guess they are a lot like another peer support area. It depends on the individual. A lot of guys will not say anything to their families or their wives or husbands, but what you will find is you will probably say little things like, “I had a bit of a bad day today” and you will go and sit down and have a beer away from everybody and your partner sort of knows, “Okay, I’ll just leave him be.” So I could not really answer about those flood days.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Presumably there is an employee assistance program within the Queensland fire service?

Mr Oliver: Yes.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Is that being used or are there deficiencies in that?

Mr Oliver: There used to be a rule that you have three or four counselling sessions from a professional. You would go through peer support and they get you, in and it is sort of separate from the fire service so they do proffer a lot of that support. I believe now there is no limit on that; I think the fire service has understood that we have had some interesting dark times of late.

[9.40 am]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Have you had members off on stress since it has happened or workers’ comp or whatever?

Mr Oliver: What I found in 2009 when I took over this role, I had members calling in and saying to me—this is before all the floods; this is just general terms—“Look, I’m just being exited out of the fire service.” I would say, “Why?” “PTSD, I did this, this and this.” There was no recognition it was anything different. They would come to me, basically in tears a lot of them, saying, “Look, I’ve got a young family, a house loan” and things like, “What do I do with my car? I salary sacrifice my car and now I’ve lost my employment; now I’m about to be exited out the door.” I mean, they are only young people and they just see the end of their career or the end of their future at that point. So, yes, we had people coming and still do.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Has there been an escalation post-flood or not?

Mr Oliver: Yes, I believe so.

Mr A.P. JACOB: How would the union feel about mandatory checks, not just on entrance, but even annual physical and wellness checks?

Mr Oliver: The issue I have got with that is traditionally—sorry, I will go back. I think 2007 we went down this voluntary line of providing all the information to the fire service, giving them the wellness and stuff. They said all that information was quarantined, “We’ll work within our guidelines and we’ll work together and get us to a place where we need to be.” What came back at us was the guy who was leading that charge was somehow exited from that position—the guy we had trust in. They took all that information and they spread out and they started coming back at us at another angle about, “We’re going to demand you do this; we’re going to use all these figures against you.” So for a union in the workforce you are thinking, “We’ve just broken our trust.” At

the moment, I know they are developing or going down that pathway; this is from the intel that I am getting as a union person. We are happy to look at voluntary checks and possibly go into that pathway, but there has to be some parameters around it about supporting our people, because if you are turning up to, you know—just from my recollection, I think some of the things that I have been to are horrific. It would not take much for an unscrupulous employer to say, “Let’s look at this across our workforce” and exit a lot of people on so-called information.

Mr A.P. JACOB: In line with that would you see, potentially, an expanded role for the union if there was resourcing that were to come with it and that was an area that the union could maybe step up in?

Mr Oliver: Absolutely. The only trust that a firefighter in Queensland really has is in the union. The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service understands this as well, because of these issues that have happened over the years about using voluntary information to target us. We are already starting down that path and we recognise that our guys are suffering. We are getting QUT involved, asking the fire service to get involved as well by bringing their peer support program in to us so we can identify it and try to fix it. If they cannot fix it, then we will look at some other means of doing it. Whether that is a government grant and whether we set somebody in our office up to completely deal with PTSD, we do not know the answers yet, and I guess that is what you guys are trying to encapsulate as well.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I know you mentioned earlier when you came in that the union is doing some work on PTSD. Can you maybe expand on what you are doing at the moment?

Mr Oliver: It is not just PTSD; it is probably the whole wellness and fitness issue. They are sort of interlinked with the mindset, although we have seen a huge shift in the wellness and fitness area already. I will give you an example. As a fireman, we used to—you know, they would be smoking around the table and waiting for the bells to go and they would have a meat pie and a can of Coke. Now you walk into any fire station, no-one smokes anymore, they will have salads, and are very keen and conscious of what they eat, so they are very well aware—that is our trend anyway.

After the floods, when I explained about these phone calls coming in, I said, “We’ve got to do something.” I went to a briefing from QUT. We have a professor and a doctor of psychology working on it. They gave a paper. We invited them to come and talk to us. From that, we have developed a partnership. The fire service has now got on board with that partnership, including the Senior Officers Union of Employees, which is firefighters from the management area. We are doing a survey now to identify what the areas are, because they are professionals and we are not, to be honest. So they are doing a research paper on it as well. Once that comes out and once we can identify what the issues are or if they are what we are saying, then we will look at trying to deal with it. We do not know what that answer is as yet, but once we get it, we will give it to the fire service to see if we can work something out.

The CHAIRMAN: Were the floods the impetus for starting all this, because this sort of thing has been going on for quite a few years everywhere else? I do not mean to insult or anything like that, but it seems to be very far behind here in comparison to what we have heard in most other places.

Mr Oliver: Yes, I agree.

The CHAIRMAN: So up to the floods it was just the macho thing; you worked it out yourself and then you would see how you would go.

Mr Oliver: Pretty much, and that mindset is still there, although the crews are more focused now—I guess it was harder times years ago. They would say, “Get over it; you’ll be right” or go to the pub and have a beer. Now you are probably more likely to sit around and talk about it and discuss what you saw at the job and how you are feeling about it. The inline manager would probably identify his crew, if you worked in and close to that crew. He might say, “Look here, mate, you better go and have a chat to someone” or organise it for them.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: And there are no personnel records kept in terms of so-and-so has been to five motor vehicle crashes in the last two years, maybe we need to—is none of that done?

Mr Oliver: Only on an ad hoc basis.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So if you are in a consistent crew, then whoever was the senior officer there might keep a bit of an eye on someone.

Mr Oliver: There is an example of when you are at a busy station—this has happened a few times that I can recollect—and one person may be exposed to five deaths in a month and it might involve children, it might involve the elderly or whatever. They will move them to a quieter station to try and give them a bit of reprieve, but what you find is they get that there, too, nowadays. We have taken all these extra roles and responsibilities. I am not sure if you understand where we come from. We do not only fires but urban search and rescue. We flew to Christchurch last year and extricated bodies out of the rubble and bits and pieces of bodies out of the rubble. They are our frontline Queensland firefighters doing that. We do trench rescue, vert rescue, confined space—we are basically an all-emergency response now; we are not so much just focused on one thing.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Did the 300 or so firefighters that were involved in the floods get any additional time off or anything like that?

Mr Oliver: Not that I know of. Sometimes the additional time off is not good for them anyway; they need to be kept busy and probably need to get back with their crews as well.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Obviously in an emergency like that you are not working your normal shift; you are there as long as you need to be. Was that certainly the situation with the floods?

Mr Oliver: Yes, certainly.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Did you find, when you were taking evidence from people, that that was also an issue or not?

Mr Oliver: Yes; fatigue and resourcing played a major part. From the two firefighters who were rescuing the boy in the Lockyer Valley I have the accounts of exactly what happened. One of them had a boy on his back and the harness broke up and he lost the boy—the man's son. He got up to the edge and the father said, "You've lost my son." Things like that are horrific. There were two firefighters who had just saved another three people, and unfortunately in a tragic accident they lost his son, which was no fault of his own, but they never had the resources they needed to effect that rescue, in my opinion.

The policy is, say, between six and eight firefighters are needed to do one rescue, but if we have two firefighters who have just performed three in a hostile environment it becomes very difficult. No-one is expecting to have a perfect environment all the time, and firefighters adapt because that is what they are; they are tradesmen-type people and professionals at what they do. But there is no perfect circumstance for them and you are going to find yourself in those positions, but the resources, I guess, were never there.

The CHAIRMAN: How big is the welfare team at Queensland Fire and Rescue Service?

[9.50 am]

Mr Oliver: I have no idea. All I know is that I believe they have the three or four people I have spoken to from over there in my time, and also the peer support group throughout the state.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any role with the volunteers?

Mr Oliver: Not really. I am friendly with their association and we talk about this as well, and they were also very concerned before they were exposed to it and put in the positions they were put in. Because they are volunteers they are used as a workforce, and possibly because of the economics—I do not know—they were certainly put into positions that I believe they should not have been as well. The volunteers in Queensland have very basic skills, and especially not in swift-water rescue.

I know the SES—I am talking about volunteer firefighters, not the whole volunteer rescue scenario—are not as effective as fully trained firefighters who work as a team and professionals either. You can only go so far generally with volunteers. I know you have your groups within the volunteers that are very professional, but they have a life outside volunteering as well.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You mentioned these auxiliary stations, which is not a concept we are familiar with. Could you maybe explain about them?

Mr Oliver: So you have a career firefighter, and then what you have is an auxiliary firefighter—I started my career as an auxiliary firefighter. Basically you are given two hours' training a week and a uniform. It is extremely basic training, and then you are put onto a truck. You can be responding to a lot of these incidents throughout the state. It is a less technical type of arena because the major metropolitan cities have career firefighters.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So they are in remote, regional, rural-type settings?

Mr Oliver: Throughout the state; in Toowoomba, for instance, you will have auxiliaries attached to a career station there, and then you have Oakey, which is auxiliary—part-timers. So it is in these areas that do not have the population to be able to pay for a full-time service, and they just have part time.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So are they like sort of paid volunteers almost?

Mr Oliver: Yes. They have a pager on their belt and away they go.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you get any sort of training in psychological first aid, such as what you are looking out for in your colleagues after you have attended events?

Mr Oliver: I have not had training in it, no. I know that they are looking at that now, I believe, at the academy, and giving them DVDs about what the recruits coming through might be exposed to. I think they are going to expand that across the general workforce. But the danger with that, in my view, is that a lot of these short-term programs are rushed out, you watch them, and then three years later you think, "That's right, I did see a DVD back then." There does not seem to be that continuous education program or monitoring. It is very sporadic.

The CHAIRMAN: When we were in New Orleans and New York they told us about retired firefighters coming back as peer supporters. Does that happen in Queensland, or you are out of the job, that is it, you are happy to be away from it?

Mr Oliver: There is the Retired Firefighters Association of Queensland. When you are in the job you are brothers in arms, and when you leave you are still brothers in arms. They can play a good role in mentoring young fireys, but basically, no, they are retired and they retire and that is about it. They do some things for the service; I know they go to the academy now and again and talk to the crews, but they do not have a formal role per se.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Do they have an association; is that what you referred to?

Mr Oliver: Yes, and it is very active. They do get involved, but not on that front.

The CHAIRMAN: You may not be able to answer this, but were you able to assess the level of stress your members had following the floods in comparison with their normal day-to-day stress?

Mr Oliver: Obviously it was heightened for a number of months afterwards. The day-to-day stress is really managed over time, but because it was horrific and out of their control it was elevated for a number of months after that. It probably still is in their own private area at home; they will not often show that they are hurting, but you know they are.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You would have had members who were also victims.

Mr Oliver: Mainly just lost houses and stuff in the area. We actually set up a fund to assist our members as well and got donations from around Australia, and none of the firefighters put their hand up for it. So they just deal with what they have to deal with.

The CHAIRMAN: A couple of the people we have spoken to have spoken about a joint academy for firefighters, police, ambulance and people like that. Would the union be supportive of that, or does it think it does not work together?

Mr Oliver: I personally think they are three different types of people. When you are a firefighter you join for whatever reason it is, and I have seen joint stations between fireys and ambulance, and there is a separation. We are all protecting the community, we are all that way, and we are all, I think, good citizen-type people, but together we are different. We have a different role to play, generally. The police, as well as emergency services or essential services—we are all similar but all different. I do not know how to explain what it is, but, yes, we all have that community focus but we are not all the same.

The CHAIRMAN: What about a joint counselling service between the organisations?

Mr Oliver: I think that would be reasonable; yes, I think that would be a supportive move. I think any improvement on what we have now is an improvement. I think in terms of PTSD you would have a similar type of—I am not sure what the word is—illnesses or cases or elevation of it, but you would have similar things that I think would be the same across the board.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So you are in touch with your counterparts in other states. Is there anywhere where you think they handle this sort of issue better?

Mr Oliver: No—I do not know, to be honest. We are pretty focused in Queensland at the moment trying to identify what the issue is because I think we are just all learning, too. I know we have come from an old brigade into a professional one now and we go to a lot more different types of things, so we are seeing impacts that are probably sitting there for 15 years come through.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you doing any work with your national office to set standards for training and counselling and things like that?

Mr Oliver: Not that I know of, but our workplace health and safety officer is also the national coordinator for our union. Although we are saying this is a Queensland-focused area, all the results and whatever we get from it will be given to the national body, so we share information from every state. It just so happens that we have taken on board—I do not like getting the side down on these things and talking about committees; when I see a problem I want to get in and get the information. I do not care who pays for it, let us just get it and share it, and I think that is a better ethos than trying to move forward as a national body at the moment.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you any ideas at the moment about what you would like to see in place for both training and for follow-up after major events?

Mr Oliver: Look, I think you have hit on a few good ideas. You have identified the retired firefighters; I think they could play a good role at the academy, depending on who it is. Some of them, probably not; they would just talk about their life experience, but if they were properly trained, yes. I do not know about the intermediate stages with the on-shift crews; we sort of get bombarded with all different types of programs and computer programs and new SOPs, and to add another level in there, I just do not know if that would be successful. It would be like, “We have to turn up to this for this reason.” I think that the guys who are really suffering need that support now and when they retire. I do not know if it is in terms of you do 20 years and get out, like the old military used to do, or have the option to go, but being able to do that financially is hard.

Once you leave, there is no support network because you lose all your friends in the job as well. I think the military get a white card to be able to go to the doctor and say, “This is what I get and these are my issues”, and they are fully supported that way. I think that is not a bad option. There is

no way you can shelter us from these exposures because that is the nature of our job now. I guess that giving us all the information about how to deal with it would help; I do not know.

[10.00 am]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Obviously in your job, the focus on OH&S is pretty important. You go into dangerous situations so there is a high focus on physical safety. It seems that some of the things to at least mitigate the post-traumatic stress could be integrated with OH&S-type practices.

Mr Oliver: Definitely.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: As you say, you are not just having a course that lasts for half a day, or a DVD, or something; it is just put in as part of the OH&S-type focus.

Mr Oliver: The guys listen to the union. If we ask them to do a survey, they will do a survey. If the fire service asks them to do a survey, they say, “We don’t trust you; we’re not going near it.” There is some integration with unions. We are a type of union that does not fight over the size of sausage rolls in the canteen, if you know what I mean. We are heavily involved in workplace health and safety. We came from a commission recently on the type of vests that the guys who went through all this wear throughout the state. We are trying to deal with a lot of specific OH&S issues, because we are a rescue front and a lot of the stuff is not designed for us, but it also includes PTSD programs. I do not know if there are a lot designed for us. Everyone seems to be having a bit of a chop here and there about how to try and get it together, but something needs to be done and I guess that is why the QUT is involved on our level so I can identify and try to deal with it too.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the EAP extend to firefighters’ families as well?

Mr Oliver: What is that?

The CHAIRMAN: The employee assistance program.

Mr Oliver: Yes, it does.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that well known?

Mr Oliver: No. I know, and union people will know. The employer has probably told them a hundred times, but as I say you sort of get bombarded with all these bits of information and they either do it or they do not. It is pretty hopeless.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Have members got a wallet card or something so they know who to ring? Is it proactively promoted in the department?

Mr Oliver: They will probably have a poster on the wall that says “fire care”. They might send out an email every three months, but again, with 3,000 emails, it is “delete, delete, delete.”

The CHAIRMAN: What is the union coverage? You said there are about 2,400 fireys.

Mr Oliver: There are roughly 2,150 professional fireys in Queensland who do it as a career. Our coverage is about 98%; there might be a few that slip through that we have to track down—in gest! Then with the auxiliary numbers, I think we have around 430 or so, and they transition in and out. That is our membership. There are another 1,800 who are not our members who are auxiliaries.

The CHAIRMAN: What is your view of the EAP? Is it effective or can it be improved?

Mr Oliver: I think it needs an overhaul, to be honest, if they are ringing me at the union office.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service run a chaplaincy service as well as part of their welfare team?

Mr Oliver: We have one chaplain in the south east. I do not know of any others across the state.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Is he well received?

Mr Oliver: Yes. We have had a few good chaplains; they have been very well received.

The CHAIRMAN: Are there any particular lessons after the flood that you can tell us about that we can take back to WA? I was going to say that we do not get floods, but then I remembered Warmun and Carnarvon up north.

Mr Oliver: As I am operational officer, I think more about the practicalities of supporting the crews on the ground. I do not get in the sphere of psychologically and knowing how to improve that. I think about what our guys on the ground need: support, equipment, manpower; and when they get back, they need to talk about it. I wish I could elaborate more than that, but I cannot because I am in that same sphere that you are trying to identify. I do not know, so I am pretty confused about what we do.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You are actually synthesizing it quite well. We have heard evidence from psychologists saying that the more people feel they are capable and prepared for any contingency, then the less serious impact it has psychologically. What you are saying is that your members, knowing they had few resources, they did not have the equipment or the training to deal with the situations they were presented with, which then presents in PTSD.

Mr Oliver: You have helped me with my next statement. I see where you are going. I worked on the trucks in Toowoomba for around 10 years. In that 10 years we had two stations, very under-resourced, understaffed. I think we had 10 firefighters on at any one time. You will find more people serving at the counter at McDonalds than you will see in the trucks. We were arguing and asking—probably not effectively—to try to get more staff, because since 1974 we actually had a decrease of one staff member. We had picked up all these extra roles and responsibilities and training in all these rescue disciplines, whereas we used to go just to fires, basically. So we are doing all this without an increase in staffing, and it really teaches you to work well as a team and look after each other that way. But I know that a lot of our guys are still hurting, not just from the floods but everyday events. When I drive through Toowoomba, I will look and think: two kids perished in that house; I picked up a body there; I went over here.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: How long ago was that?

Mr Oliver: Five or six years. I find myself thinking about these things when I am driving through Toowoomba. It is a populated city, lack of resources and more exposure—everything; this is with every job because all you have got is two trucks. Whatever happened in that city, I have been to.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you any other statements that you would like to make?

Mr Oliver: Thank you for taking the time to go through it all. At the end of the day we wish to help as well, if there is anything that we can do. We are going down that path. If there is anything that you guys need from us in terms of statements from the flood commission, which are very detailed and may put you in a different state of mind so that you start taking on what we see. That is what I found from reading the statements. We are more than happy to do anything we can to help.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: When is the University of Queensland research likely to be available.?

Mr Oliver: The surveys are out there now; they are getting done. I think we have done 300 or 400. We are after about one thousand and a half of different cohorts, so hopefully within six months we will have a result from that. If you guys want access to that from then, I have no issue with that.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: We will be finalising our report in September, and hopefully that will be a platform for other jurisdictions as well.

[10.10 am]

Mr Oliver: I will introduce you to Luke, so he can explain his qualifications and what he is doing as well.

Mr Donaldson: Thank you very much. It has been a very interesting exposure as well. I am working with the union at the moment, essentially as a research assistant, doing an honours project

on psychological injury and legislation in Queensland. I have to say that from my qualifications with a business industrial relations and psychology background it is quite interesting to see the dynamics and how it really is operative now in the physical database sense from the theory based sense, and I am hoping to bring it all back into the system.

Mr Oliver: He is working with us to identify it as well.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: As you heard, this inquiry has been in the United States, and in some jurisdictions like New York their presumptive legislation for cancer also includes PTSD as well. It is now presumed if a firefighter acquires PTSD, it is by virtue of his or her exposure to workplace issues. That presumption is there, so it is just a matter of time, presumably, that everywhere else takes the same view.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: We went down the path—you have exposed the practical areas of weaknesses with resources, equipment and things like that—of focussing on the trauma of people on the front line dealing with fatalities on a regular basis, but primarily through a disaster. We have focussed on that because men—women too, but primarily men—do not want to admit that it is having an effect on them. We have found that a lot of departments have not really been prepared to look after them. That is why we have focussed on that and why we are trying to bring that to people's attention. I do not have the full picture—I am not going to pretend—but what you have drawn for us this morning, with that gentleman who lost that child, I cannot even comprehend what that gentleman is going through—no matter what. Your colleagues would have known that he did everything by the book, but the father may not have known that. That is very difficult.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: In fact, he probably went above and beyond the book, because he had to.

Mr Oliver: There were no rules that day; we were into it. They were sitting on top of a car and one rescuer took a person, then the car starts to move, and things like this; it is very dynamic, but they are good, thinking people.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: We appreciate your candour. Thank you for that.

The CHAIRMAN: I again thank you on behalf of the committee. That was great information this morning. I am disappointed, I have to say to a certain degree, that Queensland Fire and Rescue Service do not seem to be more advanced. We are speaking to them as well, so hopefully we can jog them into some action a bit quicker. We will send you a transcript of the evidence you have given. If there are any corrections needed, you can send them back to us; that will be great. Thank you very much for coming in.

Hearing concluded at 10.14 am
