Victoria Police Mental Health Review – Summary Report

Report Overview and Key Findings

In October last year, Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton announced a review into the mental health and wellbeing of Victoria Police employees. Past and present employees and their families were asked to contribute to the Review, which looked at how the organisation can best deliver wellbeing services to support employees throughout their career and into their post-Victoria Police lives.

The Review was led by clinical and organisational psychologist, Dr Peter Cotton, and supported by Peter Bull, a retired superintendent, Nancy Hogan, a senior healthcare executive, and Maryanne Lynch, a senior research assistant.

Together, they received over 450 submissions from current and former employees, and their families. They also consulted with key external stakeholders including The Police Association, Community and Public Sector Union, Phoenix, beyondblue, the Australian Defence Force, and other police jurisdictions. The following is a summary of this 90 page Review.

Mental health and suicide risk profile

- The current organisational mental health risk profile is significant but there is a lack of clarity around particular issues, including suicide risk. Hence a 'prevalence study' is recommended to establish a clear workforce mental health baseline profile.

- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is not the only mental health risk at Victoria Police: depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse are just as, if not more, prevalent.

Mental health contributing factors

- Whilst operational incident exposure is an important contributing factor to mental health risk, organisational factors (particularly leadership style, management practices and workload pressures) as well as personal relationship difficulties, are also significant contributors.

- Contributing factors interact in complex ways, i.e., personal relationship problems can be a major driver of the onset of mental health issues, or sometimes may actually be a consequence of the impact of other risk factors.

Mental health stigma and culture

- A key challenge identified was delayed help-seeking or avoidance when experiencing mental health issues. Contributing factors of these being:

  - A widespread and entrenched stigma regarding the reporting of mental health issues within Victoria Police, leading to reluctance to seek help; and

  - Under-recognition of warning signs in themselves and by others around them stemming from low mental health literacy.

- To improve mental health outcomes, Victoria Police must validate and increase early help-seeking behaviour.

Leadership culture

- There is a need for fundamental change in Victoria Police leadership culture, with core organisation-wide weaknesses in 'people-focused' leadership capability.

- People-focused leadership capability is a mental health protective factor that operates through building supportive, cohesive and engaging team-based processes and practices; which can improve levels of employee wellbeing and reduce mental health risk.

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Internal health and wellbeing services

- While no major fundamental gaps in the current Victoria Police internal health and support services were identified, it was recognised that early intervention and prevention initiatives receive limited focus through lack of resourcing.

- To assist employees to increase early help-seeking behaviour, internal health and support services must be adequately resourced to provide appropriate focus on early intervention and prevention initiatives.

Employee lifecycle health management

- A more comprehensive employee lifecycle health management approach is required, from selection through to transition/retirement.

- Mandatory organisational-wide mental health literacy and people-focused leadership up-lift programs need to be implemented. This includes embedding mental health literacy into recruit training, as well as all leadership programs.

- Increased family engagement is required, with access to mental health literacy.

- A wellbeing monitoring regime should be progressed, coordinated with safe-t-net.

- The workers' compensation process can be challenging, therefore improved support for employees through the WorkCover process is required.

- There is a need to establish a state-wide specialist mental health network of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists experienced in the treatment of PTSD with emergency services employees - who members can be referred to on an outpatient basis.

- Finally, retiring members should undertake an exit interview and mental health screening assessment, and with any indicated health management plan, reasonable costs for work-related conditions should be funded.

Summary of Recommendations

The Review Team made 39 recommendations in the report. Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton is committed to actioning all of the recommendations.

Overall, the Review Team concluded that genuine and measurable improvements in mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention outcomes are achievable through implementation of the recommendations. The 39 recommendations can be summarised as follows.

Mental Health Literacy Program

The Review recommends the development and implementation of an organisation-wide comprehensive mental health literacy program, co-ordinated with face-to-face and other (e.g. online) delivery modalities. Mental health literacy should also be available to former employees, and family members of employees.

Existing Police Psychology Unit program content should be refreshed and updated; with mental health literacy embedded and examinable in all recruit training and leadership programs.

To commence the mental health literacy program, a series of brief video vignettes including senior leaders openly discussing their personal struggle with the impact of stressful operational incidents and other policing challenges is recommended.

Please refer to recommendations 1-5, 11 and 19-20 in the full report for further information.

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Leadership Culture Change Program

The Review recommends the development and implementation of a leadership culture change program with an overarching people-orientated leadership framework.

This will include relaunching and revamping the Victoria Police Values and Expected Behaviours, adding 'Safety' as an additional value.

Wellbeing and mental fitness will be re-positioned as foundational; with increased accountability for people-focused leadership in the performance appraisal process as well as for return to work outcomes.

Please refer to recommendations 6-7, 8-10 and 26 in the full report for further information.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Services

The Review recommends increased health and wellbeing resources to meet additional service demands such as increased mental health screenings, provision of professional supervision services, increased coaching and leader support initiatives, workshop content updates and mental health literacy program delivery requirements.

An integrated electronic client management system is recommended to enhance service delivery, as well as re-alignment of internal health and wellbeing services.

An external network of specialist mental health service providers (mainly psychiatrists and clinical psychologists) is recommended, as well as e-treatment for rural and remote locations.

Please refer to recommendations 12-18, 25 and 29-30 in the full report for further information.

Employee Lifecycle Initiative

The Review recommends a more comprehensive employee lifecycle health management approach, from selection through to transition/retirement.

This will include an organisation-wide wellbeing monitoring regime, coordinated with safe-t-net, consisting of informal checks with supervisors and online self-management tools.

Improved support for employees through the WorkCover process is required, through an enhanced case management approach.

Greater temporary return to work opportunities should be developed, with additional options for redeployment to other organisations as well as improved career break processes. An 'opt-out' provision should be explored for SOCITs.

The Retired Peer Support Network should be expanded; and mental health screenings to be undertaken for all retiring employees.

Please refer to recommendations 21-24, 27-28 and 31-39 in the full report for further information.

If you require access to professional support and advice in relation to a work or personal related crisis, current and former employees, as well as their immediate families, can phone the 24 hour Support line on (03) 9247 3344.