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Beyond Blue welcomes findings of Senate Inquiry into the mental health of first responders

A call for a national action plan to address the high rates of stigma and mental health conditions among police and emergency services personnel is one of the key recommendations from a sweeping Senate inquiry into the mental health of first responders.

Moves towards presumptive legislation for PTSD and compulsory mental health awareness training were also flagged by the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee's report into the role of Commonwealth, state and territory governments in addressing high rates of mental health conditions.

The Senators' report draws heavily on Beyond Blue's landmark *Answering the call* survey of over 21,000 current and former police and emergency services personnel from across Australia.

The Senate report recognises the significance of Beyond Blue's study, referencing key findings relating to important issues like workplace culture, stigma and the need for a collaborative approach to creating mentally healthy workplaces.

Released just last November, *Answering the call* was a world-first survey about mental health issues among police, ambulance, firefighters and State Emergency Services personnel, including volunteers.

Six of the Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee's 14 recommendations reflected aspects of Beyond Blue's recommendations to governments in *Answering the call*. Mirroring the Senate inquiry, Beyond Blue has called for:

- The Commonwealth to lead the design and implementation of a national action plan, with input from all jurisdictions;
- Compulsory mental health awareness training for all first responders;
- Early intervention support for all first responders, designed to help prevent or reduce severity of mental health symptoms;
- A rethink of aspects of the workers' compensation scheme;
- Providing support to all former first responders; and
- An assessment of the merits of presumptive legislation for PTSD.

Presumptive legislation means those seeking workers' compensation for PTSD do not need to prove they developed the condition on the job.

Beyond Blue Chair, the Hon. Julia Gillard AC, said the Senate Committee's recommendations demonstrated that police and emergency service agencies needed more support to advance the work many were already doing to look after the mental health of their staff.

"Police and emergency services personnel are first on the scene when people are in danger. They put their lives on the line for us everyday and they need our support," Ms Gillard said.

"The Senate report endorses many of the findings contained in Beyond Blue's *Answering the call* survey, calling for a national approach to these very serious issues."

Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman said the evidence given by many former and currently serving personnel, their families and other experts to the inquiry was consistent with Beyond Blue's work.

"*Answering the call* showed us quite clearly that the current workers' compensation scheme was adding to people's psychological distress – and that had to change," Ms Harman said.

“The Senate report drills down into how it should change, specifically with its recommendation for a review of the use of independent medical examiners in workers’ compensation cases.

“This report adds to the growing body of evidence that a co-ordinated, national response is required in response to the mental health burden borne by our first responders.”

Ms Harman said Beyond Blue would continue working with agencies around the country.

“Before *Answering the call*, we lacked the data we needed to comprehensively understand the mental health issues affecting police and emergency services agencies,” Ms Harman said.

“We now know where the gaps exist and can set a clear path for agencies to work collaboratively so their employees and volunteers can achieve their best possible mental health.

“Beyond Blue looks forward to translating the available evidence into effective resources and programs to support the mental health of those who risk their lives to protect us.”

Beyond Blue’s *Answering the call* survey provided ground-breaking insights into the prevalence of mental health issues among police and emergency service personnel. It found:

- One in three police and emergency services employees experience high or very high psychological distress compared to one in eight Australian adults;
- Over one in 2.5 employees and one in three volunteers report being diagnosed with a mental health condition in their life compared to one in five Australian adults;
- Employees and volunteers report suicidal thoughts over two times more often than adults in the general population and are three times more likely to have a suicide plan;
- Over half employees surveyed experienced a traumatic event during the course of their work that deeply affected them;
- Poor workplace practices and culture are equally debilitating as exposure to trauma;
- Employees who have worked more than ten years in police and emergency services are almost twice as likely to experience psychological distress and six times more likely to have symptoms of PTSD compared to those with less than two years’ service;
- Three in four employees who had made a claim for psychological injury found the current workers’ compensation process to be detrimental to their recovery.

The full *Answering the call* report can be found here:

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/about-our-work/workplace-mental-health/pep-program/national-mental-health-and-wellbeing-study-of-police-and-emergency-services>

Mental health professionals are available at the Beyond Blue Support Service via phone 24/7 on 1300 22 4636 or via www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support for online chat (3PM – 12AM AEST or email responses within 24 hours).