



**BUSHFIRE
VOLUNTEERS**



8 February 2024

Dear Volunteer

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Presumptive Legislation

We hope this update finds you well. We are writing as your representatives, with one common voice, to update you as we progress the important issue of presumptive post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) legislation facing all volunteers as members on behalf of the:

- Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service Association of Western Australia,
- Volunteer Marine Rescue of Western Australia (VMRWA),
- Volunteer Fire and Emergency Services Association of Western Australia (ESVA),
- Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades Western Australia and
- State Emergency Services Volunteer Association of Western Australia.

On December 20, 2023, the Associations were invited to meet with The Honourable Minister Stephen Dawson MLC, Minister for Emergency Services, and Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) Commissioner Klemm AFSM to raise and discuss our volunteers concerns around PTSD presumptive legislation being afforded to career fire fighters, and not being afforded to volunteers within the Workers Compensation and Injury Management Amendment Regulations 2023 (No 2).

Minister Dawson explained that volunteers are covered under the insurance policy held by the Insurance Commission of Western Australia (ICWA) to cover injury to volunteers serving within DFES roles. Bushfire Volunteers are covered under a separate insurance held by Local Government to cover their volunteers in case of injury. They acknowledged, however, that these policies did not provide a presumptive basis of claim. The Minister, as a result, offered to have the matter addressed in the upcoming consolidation of the existing Acts.

In further discussions with Minister Dawson and Commissioner Klemm AFSM, it was agreed that the injury claim process would be reviewed. This review would include an education program around myth busting of PTSD and mental health awareness for our brigades, groups and units.

Association representatives met on January 24, to discuss our position and possible next steps. All representatives stated their continued commitment to see volunteers covered under presumptive legislation. It was acknowledged that if we accept any that presumptive legislation may not be possible within the *Workers Compensation and Injury Management Act*, then an alternate should be found, either within existing legislation or at the very least within the proposed *Consolidated Emergency Services Act*. Representatives expressed concern regarding the timeliness of this latter option.

Your volunteer associations are not going to let the issue of presumptive PTSD coverage for volunteers fall aside. As an association representative stated during our meeting on the January 24, "Just because one individual receives financial incentive and another individual volunteers to complete their roles, does not change either party's necessity to be covered under the exact same presumptive legislation." Each party paid or unpaid faces the same level of psychological hazards when confronted with traumatic, life changing scenes.

Just as it can take many years for the evidence of toxin exposure to appear in a fire fighter's physiological system, which they are now covered for by the presumptive cancer legislation, it can take many years for the psychological hazards to appear within a fire fighter's psychological system. When our volunteers present with these symptoms and injury, there should be a legislated presumption that this injury was as a direct result of their role of volunteering within emergency services. With presumptive legislation the burden of proof lies with the employer disproving the PTSD was caused from volunteering in emergency services.

The associations firmly believe every individual within emergency services, paid or unpaid, has the right to return home as healthy as when they left home to complete their role. If they are injured in any way, physically or psychologically, there is a duty of care that should be provided to that individual from whichever level of responsible government be that federal, state or local.

The association presidents will be requesting a meeting with Commissioner Klemm AFSM, and other DFES representatives to further present your concerns on this statewide and service wide issue, and to work together with DFES in establishing some fact sheets and education programs around PTSD as well as discuss hurdles faced within the Insurance claim process. We look forward to meeting with Commissioner Klemm AFSM in the coming weeks.

What we need from you

We need you, our volunteers, to provide to us any evidence and information about experiences and/or difficulties faced when attempting to access mental health services or compensation. Your stories will help us build the case to present to Commissioner Klemm AFSM and to Minister Dawson.

All association presidents have given their approval and endorsement for volunteers from every service to detail your story to the email address voice@vfrs.asn to assist us to collate your feedback. These stories will not be published without your permission and, if they are to be published, this can be done on an anonymous basis if requested.

Thank you for your service and please continue to look after each other as you serve your communities in their time of need.

Yours sincerely



Paul du Boulay

President

Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service Association of Western Australia



Trevor Wise

President

Volunteer Fire and Emergency Services Association of Western Australia



Lorraine Webster

President

Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades Western Australia



Greg Cook

President

State Emergency Services Volunteer Association of Western Australia

Jeff Howe ESM

Jeff Howe ESM

Commander

Volunteer Marine Rescue of Western Australia