



# MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY FOR FIRST RESPONDER ORGANISATIONS IN NSW



**THE MENTAL HEALTH  
COMMISSION OF NSW  
AND THE BLACK DOG  
INSTITUTE ACKNOWLEDGE  
THE CENTRAL ROLE  
PLAYED BY FIRST  
RESPONDER AGENCIES  
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
THIS STRATEGY.**



**NSW Police Force**



**NSW RURAL  
FIRE SERVICE**



**UNSW  
AUSTRALIA**

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# MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

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The NSW Government is grateful for the vital work done by our first responder workforce in supporting and protecting our communities. The people who volunteer and work for first responder organisations in NSW carry out their work with dedication, professionalism and great courage.

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These men and women are on the front-line in disasters, accidents and crisis. In the course of their work, they are frequently exposed to traumatic events and this can take its toll. It is important to acknowledge that the challenges associated with the work of first responders were not always well understood and consequently our support for their mental health and wellbeing in the past has not been adequate.

However, our understanding and responses are now changing for the better. Over recent years, the NSW Government has invested heavily in the mental health and wellbeing of first responders. Since 2011, the NSW government has invested \$2.2 million in an integrated program of research that has allowed each of the emergency services in NSW to work closely with a team of researchers to develop new evidence-based approaches to promoting the mental health of those front-line workers.

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for First Responder Organisations in NSW builds upon some of the work that is already being done, but, more importantly, aims to guide the next stage of this journey. This Strategy is also the first time in Australia that first responder agencies have collaborated to develop a shared mental health and wellbeing direction.

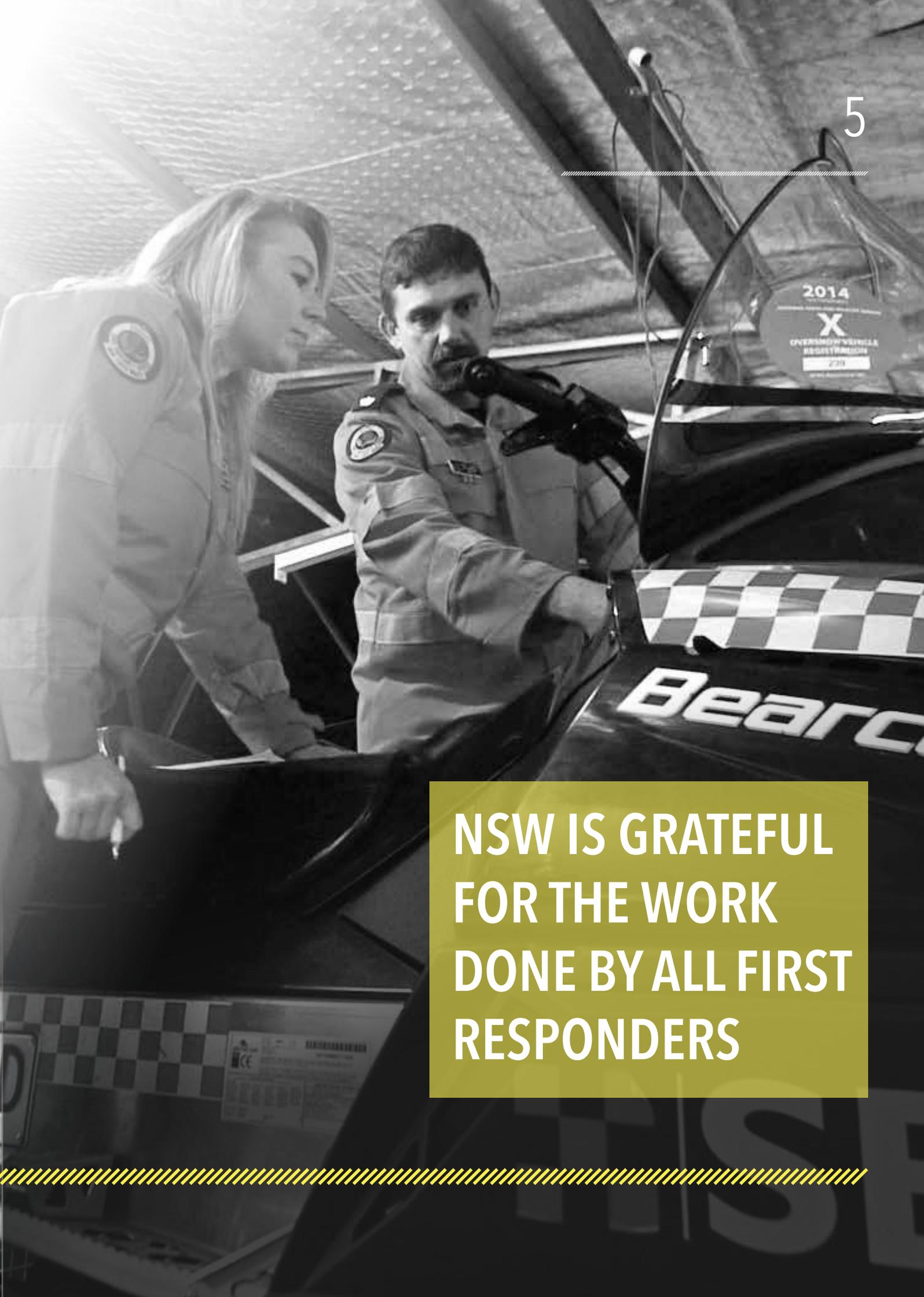
Our first responders help us when we are in need. It's our responsibility to help them when they need it.

On behalf of the NSW Government and my fellow Ministerial colleagues – Deputy Premier the Hon. Troy Grant MP, Minister for Emergency Services the Hon. David Elliott MP, and Minister for Health the Hon. Jillian Skinner MP – I commend this strategy to you.



**Pru Goward MP**  
Minister for Mental Health





**NSW IS GRATEFUL  
FOR THE WORK  
DONE BY ALL FIRST  
RESPONDERS**



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# INTRODUCTION

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**THIS STRATEGY SETS OUT THE COMMITMENT OF NSW FIRST RESPONDER AGENCIES TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF THEIR STAFF AND MEMBERS. IT REPRESENTS A CONSENSUS AMONG THE AGENCIES ABOUT WHAT IS REQUIRED TO MEET THIS OBLIGATION.**

In NSW, first responder organisations include; NSW Police Force, Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW Ambulance, the Rural Fire Service of NSW, the State Emergency Service (SES), Marine Rescue NSW and the Volunteer Rescue Association (VRA).

In line with the World Health Organisation, this strategy defines first responder mental health as a state of well-being in which a worker realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life and work, can work productively and is able to continue to make a contribution to her or his community.<sup>1</sup>

There is increasing recognition that all employers have a responsibility to promote mentally healthy practices in the workplace and to support employees when they are experiencing mental health issues. For first responders who are regularly exposed to potentially stressful and traumatic events the need for a coherent approach to promoting and protecting mental health and wellbeing that reflects their unique role is particularly important.



This Strategy adopts an integrated approach to mental health, with different interventions aimed at mental health promotion, protection and intervention. This is in keeping with the approach suggested in the beyondblue good practice framework for mental health and wellbeing in first responder organisations. While many factors are shared amongst the different first responder organisations, there are also important differences in the relationship between work and mental health within different agencies.



Volunteer first responders are likely to have different levels of training and experience prior to any traumatic event and may also have less immediate access to workplace programs. Even full-time first responders may have differing levels of exposure and support depending on whether they are based in metropolitan or rural areas. While these differences will be important for each organisation to consider, there are common principles and strategic objectives around mental health and wellbeing that are relevant for all first responder organisations in NSW.

It is these principles and objectives that this document seeks to address.

The strategic objectives set out in this document will only be met via a coordinated effort by all stakeholders, including first responder organisations, policy makers, health professionals, insurance and rehabilitation organisations, unions and first responders themselves. First responders' lived experience of emergency service work and mental ill health should play a key role in developing responses to the challenges outlined in this document. ❖

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# PRINCIPLES STATEMENT

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THE APPROACH OUTLINED IN THIS STRATEGY IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

- ◆ Mental health and wellbeing is everybody's business. Members, managers, colleagues and individuals all have a role to play in promoting mentally healthy practices for everyone.
- ◆ Work and volunteer activities are important to our wellbeing. First responder organisations should strive to create mentally healthy work / volunteer environments. This is especially important when exposure to traumatic situations and events is an inherent part of the role.
- ◆ Organisations should take a strategic approach to identifying and managing risk and putting protective factors in place.
- ◆ There is a continuum of mental health a first responder may experience, with each individual's level of symptoms likely to shift over time. As a result, a continuum of support is required from self-care and peer support through to tertiary health services.
- ◆ It is important to accommodate changing needs across the career-span from recruitment and training through to retirement.
- ◆ Leaders have a key role in actively promoting and maintaining positive practices and relationships.
- ◆ Programs should consider that factors outside of the agency can also impact, both positively and negatively, on an individual's mental health.
- ◆ Effective prevention and intervention strategies require an ongoing commitment to the evidence and must be developed in partnership with frontline staff and members.
- ◆ It is important that individuals also take steps to protect their own mental health and wellbeing, including seeking help when required.



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# STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

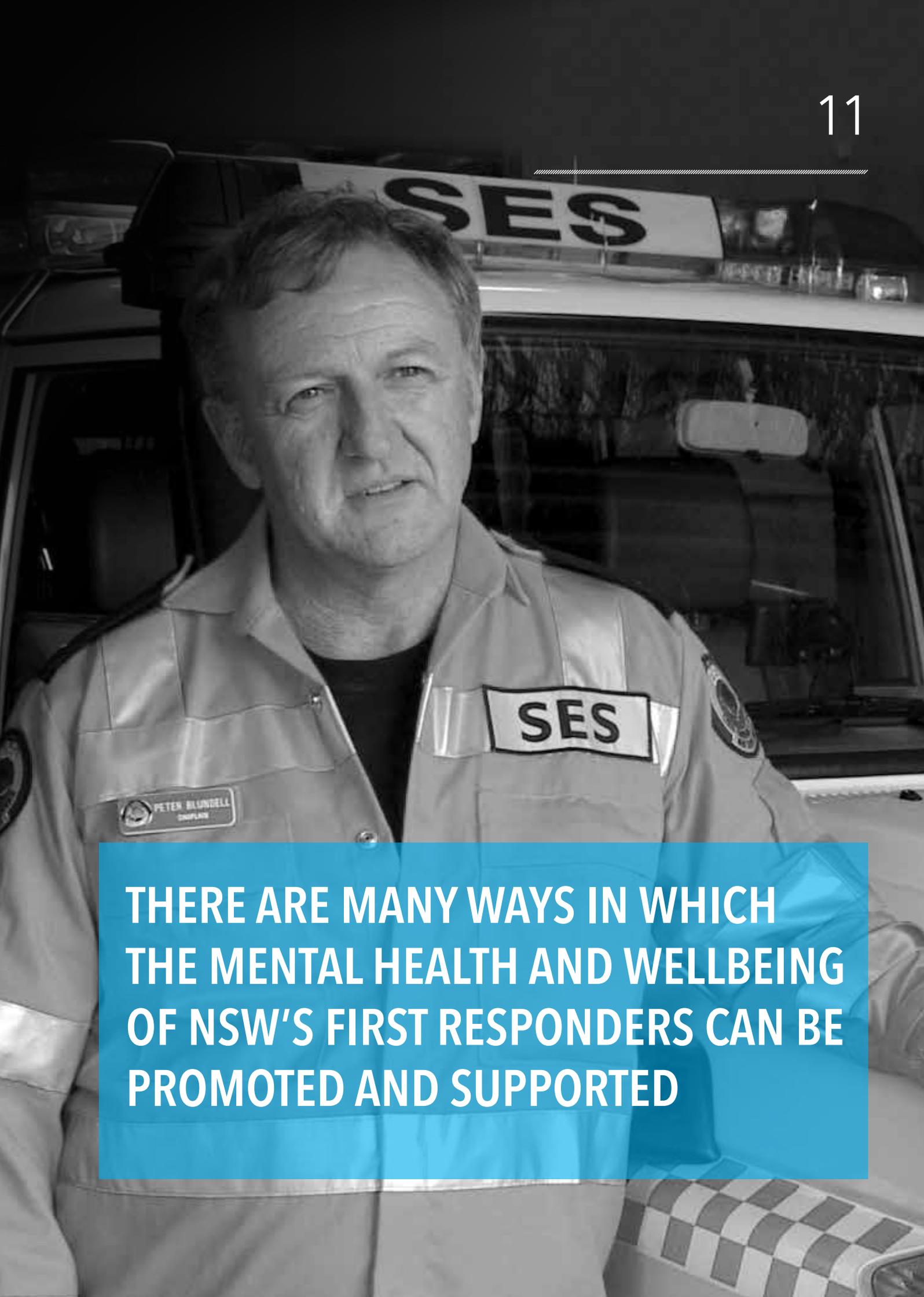
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There are many ways in which the mental health and wellbeing of NSW's first responders can be promoted and supported. Different strategies and programs will be appropriate for different first responder organisations and for different groups within each organisation. However, it is possible to outline a number of overarching strategic objectives that can guide the actions and responses within each of NSW's first responder organisations.

In implementing each of these strategic objectives there are some actions common to all, which are critical to achieving the stated goal. These are:



1. Robust engagement of the workforce/ membership at every stage of planning and implementing the strategic objective.
2. Close partnership and collaboration between first responder agencies, as well as policy makers, insurers, health professionals, experts and rehabilitation organisations, unions and first responders themselves.
3. Continuous quality improvement with ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of strategies implemented and responsiveness to new knowledge and research as it becomes available.



**THERE ARE MANY WAYS IN WHICH  
THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING  
OF NSW'S FIRST RESPONDERS CAN BE  
PROMOTED AND SUPPORTED**

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1

### PROMOTE AND SUPPORT THE GOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF FIRST RESPONDERS THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREER



The mental health and wellbeing of staff and members must be a key priority for all first responder organisations. Staff and member wellbeing needs to be addressed at all levels of an organisation and should be a consideration when any new policy or practice is discussed, and a balance found between concern for individuals' mental health and productivity and other operational concerns.<sup>2</sup>

Consistent, visible support from organisation leaders is an essential component of any first responder mental health and wellbeing strategy. As well as promoting individual strategies and programs, first responder leaders must ensure that there are clear governance structures for mental health policies and action plans.



While senior leadership is vital, all employees and members need to have an opportunity to be involved in the planning and implementing of mental health and wellbeing initiatives.

Promoting and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of staff and members requires a coordinated suite of interventions. As outlined in the objectives below, these need to address mental health prevention, early help seeking, treatment and rehabilitation. Mental health promotion activities will be most effective in a climate where mental health matters can be openly discussed without fear of stigma or consequence.

It is likely that different types of support and mental health promotion will be required at different stages of a first responder's career. Mental health and resilience training should begin from the first stages of emergency work training and should initially provide mental health awareness training, help-seeking advice and evidence-based resilience training. Mental health training and promotion strategies should then progress as first responders move into different stages of their career, including strategies on transitioning into retirement. ❏



## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2

### DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE RISK OF MENTAL DISORDER AND PROMOTE MENTAL RESILIENCE AMONGST FIRST RESPONDERS



First responder organisations need to have a systematic approach to risk management. First responders are routinely exposed to a range of factors that can increase the risk of mental health problems, including trauma, conflict, lack of control over their work or volunteer environment and unusual working hours. It is not possible for any first responder organisation to eliminate exposure to all of these risk factors. However, by having systems in place to measure and monitor these risks, organisations are better placed to respond in a way that can minimise or mitigate the risk. Any risk management approach needs to be flexible and consider the roles and responsibilities of both the organisation and the individual.



First responder organisations should also strive to promote protective factors, such as good leadership, team morale and colleague support. There is increasing evidence that workplaces can teach staff skills that may increase their resilience to difficult situations and reduce their risk of developing mental health problems.<sup>34</sup> When resilience programs are offered to first responders, they should be based on the best research evidence available and should be tailored for their specific needs. ☒



## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3

### CREATE A CULTURE THAT FACILITATES EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN FIRST RESPONDERS AND ENCOURAGES EARLY HELP SEEKING

There is a range of barriers that may prevent first responders asking for help when needed. These include stigma, embarrassment, lack of knowledge, uncertainty regarding treatment options or concerns regarding the impact seeking help may have on their career. Delays in seeking help can prolong suffering and make recovery more complicated. There is a range of ways in which first responder organisations can seek to reduce barriers to help seeking, including stigma reduction initiatives, mental health education and peer support programs. Managers and team leaders should play a key role in assisting staff and members and may need additional training on how to recognise and respond to individuals experiencing mental health difficulties. In order to allow managers to carry out these tasks, it is important that strategies are also in place to support managers' mental health and wellbeing.

In some situations, screening programs or regular wellbeing checks may have a role in promoting early help seeking.<sup>5</sup> However, mandated mental health screening is not without risks and there is ongoing debate about the role of such screening programs in a workplace setting.<sup>6,7</sup> If a first responder organisation chooses to provide regular mental health screening it should form part of a wider mental health strategy and be backed up with appropriate resources to respond to positive screening results. Providing first responders with the option of broader wellbeing checks and normalising these as part of regular self-care, can be an effective way of encouraging early help seeking and promoting more open discussion of mental health issues amongst staff and members. ☒

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4

FIRST RESPONDERS WHO DEVELOP A MENTAL DISORDER RECEIVE HIGH QUALITY, EVIDENCE-BASED MENTAL HEALTH CARE THAT SUPPORTS THE BEST POSSIBLE FUNCTIONAL RECOVERY



The majority of mental health problems experienced by first responders have effective, evidence-based treatments. As such, when a first responder develops a mental health problem, there should be an expectation that they will be able to recover and hopefully remain as an emergency service worker. While the responsibility for the provision of medical and psychiatric treatment usually falls outside first responder agencies, each organisation should ensure they are promoting and facilitating best treatment practices for their members and staff. First responders also have a responsibility to seek out treatment when needed and to work in partnership with treating clinicians.



It is increasingly recognised that good functional recovery, including return to work, from a mental disorder is not a guaranteed consequence of symptomatic treatment.<sup>8</sup> Occupationally-focused interventions, such as evidence-based return to work programs, should now be part of the recovery and treatment plan for any first-responder suffering from a mental disorder. First responder organisations should have a role in planning and facilitating these initiatives and promoting gradual return to work as part of a coordinated recovery plan. ❖



## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5

THE UNIQUE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH FIRST RESPONDER ACTIVITY ARE ACKNOWLEDGED AND APPROPRIATE SYSTEMS PUT IN PLACE TO MITIGATE AND IDENTIFY THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF REPEATED TRAUMA EXPOSURE

The cumulative trauma exposure experienced by first responders is a unique challenge. Regular exposure to trauma is an unavoidable consequence of the first responder role, but is known to be a risk factor for a range of mental health problems.<sup>9</sup> First responder organisations need to consider various approaches to monitor each worker's cumulative exposure to trauma and ensure they have systems in place to respond when critical incidents occur.

In making these provisions it is important that first responder organisations undertake practices that are in line with the best research evidence,<sup>10</sup> and promote actions that reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and enhance protective factors and individual resilience. ❏

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 6

CONTINUE TO BUILD AN EVIDENCE BASE TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF FIRST RESPONDERS AND TO FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.



All of NSW's first responder organisations are committed to a culture of continuing improvement and evidence-based best practice. This culture must inform programs aimed at improving first responders' mental health and wellbeing. NSW already has a reputation for developing and testing new mental health initiatives for its first responder agencies. Through close collaboration with research leaders, first responder organisations in NSW will be able to ensure that their mental health programs evolve with the most up-to-date research evidence and represent world-leading best practice. Best practice within individual organisations can also be promoted by ensuring formal knowledge exchange between first responder organisations, to ensure all of NSW first responders can benefit from new knowledge and shared experiences. Future research on first responder mental health needs to be translational and focused on providing real world solutions to improve the lives of NSW's emergency service workers and volunteers. ☒



A black and white photograph of two firefighters from New South Wales Fire & Rescue. They are seen from behind, wearing helmets and jackets with reflective stripes. The firefighter on the left has 'WATSON' on his helmet and 'FIRE & RESCUE NEW SOUTH WALES' on his jacket. The firefighter on the right has 'PHILLIPS' on his helmet and 'FIRE & RESCUE NEW SOUTH WALES' on his jacket. They are standing in a large pile of rubble and debris, with a massive fire and thick black smoke rising in the background. A blue semi-transparent banner is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing white text. The overall scene is one of a major disaster or demolition site.

**ALL OF NSW FIRST RESPONDERS CAN  
BENEFIT FROM NEW KNOWLEDGE  
AND SHARED EXPERIENCES**

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