

Personal Stories– Police, Fire & Rescue, Ambulance

Purpose:

To be used to encourage your remaining personnel to participate in *Answering the call – beyondblue's* National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Police and Emergency Services Personnel. The content can be used to promote the survey in any form of internal communication your agency utilizes for example newsletters, social media, or intranet posts. Simply copy and paste the content into your standard templates and/or emails and circulate to your staff.

Timing:

This content should be used as a vital part of any communication strategies distributed in the final stages of the survey period. The content would have the most impact if it was distributed just before or at the same time the end of field reminders are sent out to staff.

Content:



Complete *beyondblue's* Answering the Call survey and save lives

Former Victoria Police Commissioner Ken Lay, Queensland Emergency Fire Service Superintendent Tim Watkins and Acting Senior Team Manager at Ambulance Victoria's Ringwood/Croydon branch Darelle Barrett have opened up about their own personal stories.

They explain why mental health must be a focus in our workplaces, and they encourage anyone invited to participate in this groundbreaking survey to take the time to fill it out.

This is an opportunity for Australian emergency services personnel to again lead the world, not just in caring for communities, but in supporting themselves and their colleagues.

Check your email inbox now to see if you're eligible and complete the survey.

KEN LAY: survey will "save lives"

The emotional pain experienced by police members during their careers will never be lost on Ken Lay.

The former Victoria Police Chief Commissioner joined the force in 1974. It was a time when debriefing after traumatic events involved sharing stories over a beer and not much else.

He remembers a time when telling a colleague you were struggling mentally was viewed as a weakness and best left unsaid.

While mental health awareness in the police force has evolved positively since then, Mr Lay says there is more that must be done.

That is why he fully supports the ***beyondblue Answering the Call*** survey.

The largest study of its kind in the world, it will build a comprehensive picture of the mental health and wellbeing of police and emergency services personnel across Australia.

It takes just 25 minutes of your time and, in the words of Mr Lay, it will help “save lives”.

“Here is an opportunity to actually make life better for our emergency service people who have suffered, are suffering, and will suffer because of what our job sometimes does to people,” Mr Lay said.

“They see things they shouldn’t have to see, they deal with people that are very difficult to deal with and if you’re not mentally well and healthy, clearly it makes (your job) very difficult.

“If they’re being damaged so badly that it’s affecting their home life as well, that only just piles more pain onto people.

“If they don’t grasp this opportunity to complete the survey, it’s a big loss. It’s an obligation really.”

Mr Lay said evidence compiled from the survey responses will help emergency service organisations create mentally healthy workforces.

“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for police members to help us understand their mental health concerns and help us to solve them,” Mr Lay said “The impact of taking the time to do the survey will be enormous.

“It will save lives. It will save people being damaged. It will save families being damaged. It will make sure people come out at the end of an emergency service career well and healthy, and they can enjoy the next phase of their lives.

“This has enormous spread about what can be done differently, from the way we bring people into the organisation, the way we train them, the way we protect them and ... that they can actually retire in one piece and not damaged.

“There would be very few emergency service workers who don’t know someone who has been in some way touched by mental illness or have had difficulty dealing with issues at work.

“This is the opportunity to support those people, prevent this happening to other people, making sure those people are made well. It’s a call to arms – you can make a difference now. Help us get there.”

Mr Lay’s sentiments are shared by Queensland Emergency Fire Services Superintendent Tim Watkins and Ambulance Victoria Acting Senior Team Manager Ringwood/Croydon branch Darelle Barrett.

Supt Watkins is two years into his recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder, a battle he is winning.

The condition was triggered by two emergency response events involving road fatalities in the early 1990s, but it wasn’t until 2015 that the after effects manifested themselves.

“I’d actually got to the point where I knew there was something wrong and I just didn’t care anymore,” Supt Watkins said.

“I was on a slippery slope and I decided to not even apply the brakes.

“It was very fortunate that two days after I made that decision someone actually said ‘mate, are you ok?’”

Those four words flicked a switch in Supt Watkins and lit up his long path of recovery.

Having returned to work, Supt Watkins was one of many emergency services personnel around the country randomly selected to complete *beyondblue’s* Answering the Call survey.

Supt Watkins wanted to tell his story to encourage those selected to complete the survey who have not filled it out will take the time to do so.

“If I can help one person not get to the point I got to, then I think it’s worthwhile,” he said about the survey and its aims.

“It is time well spent for two reasons. Doing the survey, I realised that this is a bit of a self-help check. The second thing is that the information is going somewhere where it’s going to be valued and used.

“There is certainly a desire in our own organisation to do something about this.”

For Mrs Barrett, a dislocated jaw, facial bruising and permanent scarring sustained as a graduate paramedic was an unfathomable introduction to the ambulance service.

She was assaulted towards the end of her student time while attending a callout to an inner-city pub in Melbourne.

On finding an unconscious person on the ground, Mrs Barrett assessed the situation, placing the privacy of her patient ahead of her own safety.

It was when Mrs Barrett placed a blood pressure cuff on the patient’s arm that she was besieged by a flurry of punches.

“I learnt so much from this experience, personally and professionally; a part of me is almost grateful it happened,” Mrs Barrett said.

“In the days following the assault, my physical injuries caused me to go to my GP who was quick to highlight my mental health as I hadn’t slept and had withdrawn from my kids, partially because I was mindful of scaring them with my facial injuries.”

The incident occurred at a time when mental health awareness was nowhere near as prominent as it is today within the organisation, a time when Mrs Barrett’s peers encouraged her to “get on with it”.

So, she did.

It was the kind of pressure that came with trying to earn her stripes.

“It wasn’t until I made contact with Peer Support (in the days after the incident) that I started to make my mental health a priority,” Mrs Barrett said.

Five years later, Australia’s worst ever natural disaster proved a turning point in mental health awareness at Ambulance Victoria.

“My assault caused me to be far more aware of my mental health, however, I feel a large shift occurred across the organisation post the 2009 Black Saturday fires,” Mrs Barrett said.

“I and multiple other colleagues have some degree of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) due to either our professional or personal involvement in this incident and its aftermath.”

She has relished the opportunity to fill out the **beyondblue Answering the Call** survey after being randomly selected to take part.

Mrs Barrett encouraged others who have been selected to make sure they complete the survey as it will go a long way towards demystifying mental health.

“A paramedic who is physically or mentally unwell will never perform at their best and this in turn increases the risk of something going wrong, therefore exacerbating the issues of an already struggling paramedic,” she said.

“Being proactive with the mental health of our workforce and being present before an issue becomes overwhelming is our highest priority.”

beyondblue’s Answering the Call survey

The world’s largest study on mental health across emergency services personnel is happening right here, right now.

Some of you have been invited to participate, with the aim of the **beyondblue Answering the Call** survey to collect invaluable information about the issues affecting the mental health and wellbeing of police and emergency services personnel.

The data will give *beyondblue* the evidence it needs to determine the best ways to provide support.

The survey investigates the prevalence of common mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide risk.

It will also collect important information about stigma, use of support services and programs, and factors that impact on the mental health of police and emergency services personnel.

Since October 2017, about 100,000 current and former employees and volunteers in police and emergency services agencies across Australia have been invited to participate.

Check your email account now to see if you’ve been randomly selected to take part in the survey.



This survey is funded by *beyondblue* as part of the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services with support from the Bushfire Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre.