



Minister for Education
Minister for Industrial Relations and
Minister for Racing

22 SEP 2023

Mr Neil Laurie
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Dear Mr Laurie *Neil,*

Thank you for your letter dated 25 August 2023 regarding Petition No. 3916-23, workers' compensation scheme in relation to 'first responders' or 'eligible employees', received by the Queensland Legislative Assembly.

Emergency services workers play a vital role in protecting and serving the community. Unfortunately, exposure to traumatic incidents can take a heavy toll on the mental health of these workers. Beyond Blue's 2018 *Answering the call* report found that police and emergency services workers are more than twice as likely to experience high or very high rates of psychological distress compared to the general population.

The 2019 Senate Education and Employment References Committee report, *The people behind 000: mental health of our first responders*, noted the significant risk emergency services workers have of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is the prevalent mental health condition reported by emergency services workers.

In 2018, the Palaszczuk Government engaged Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health to independently review and benchmark workers' compensation claims practices for emergency services workers claiming for mental injuries. While the review found many commendable practices, it suggested improvements in the areas of communication, education, health literacy, claims management, and rehabilitation and return to work. Many of these improvements have subsequently been implemented.

Building on this body of evidence, in 2019 I established a stakeholder reference group to provide advice to government and prepare an action plan on ways to improve the workers' compensation experience for first responders. The action plan identified a number of initiatives for implementation by employers, insurers and government including reducing the barriers to accessing workers' compensation. This led to landmark reforms to workers' compensation legislation in 2021 to introduce a presumptive entitlement to workers' compensation for first responders and other eligible employees who sustain PTSD.

Under the amendments, a first responder or eligible employee's PTSD is presumed to be work-related unless evidence to the contrary is shown to rebut this. One of the principal benefits of having a rebuttable presumption is that these injured workers are spared the distress of having to relive their trauma in order to qualify for assistance.

An administrative policy was also developed for handling all types of trauma-related mental injury claims for first responders and eligible employees to alleviate stress on workers during the claims process and ensure best practice claims management by WorkCover Queensland. The policy has been in place since October 2020.

I can also advise that earlier legislative amendments in 2019 extended the scope of WorkCover Queensland's rehabilitation and return to work obligations to injured workers who have ceased receiving entitlements. Under the amendments, an insurer must refer a worker who has stopped receiving compensation for an injury, and who has not returned to work because of the injury, to an accredited rehabilitation and return to work program of the insurer.

These provisions complement other initiatives to assist in the mental health of Queensland workers, such as the *Workers' Psychological Support Service*, a free and confidential service to connect vulnerable workers with relevant services, such as financial assistance, counselling or other types of help, and the *Workers' Compensation Information and Advisory Service* which is funded by government and independently run for the benefit of workers.

Aside from the workers' compensation scheme, many emergency services employers offer enhanced employee assistance programs. The Queensland Ambulance Service's *Priority One* service promotes the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing of ambulance personnel and their immediate family, while Queensland Fire and Emergency Services has the *Fire and Emergency Services Support Network*, which provides access to psychologists, counsellors and peer support officers, as well as organisational development and critical incident response and management services. The service is also available to volunteer emergency service workers.

The 2023 five-yearly review of the operation of the Queensland workers' compensation scheme included in its terms of reference the management of mental injuries in the scheme as well as the impact of the presumptive PTSD provisions for first responders. The findings of the review will be tabled in the Legislative Assembly shortly.

If you require additional information or would like to discuss this matter further, please contact me directly or alternatively your staff can contact Ms Katelyn Dougherty, Chief of Staff of my office, on (07) 3719 7110.

I would like to thank you, the principal petitioner and every person who signed the petition for their advocacy for emergency services workers across Queensland.

Yours sincerely



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