



SIRENS OF SILENCE

Charity Inc.

SUPPORTING OUR TRIPLE ZERO HEROES

Submission:

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment Inquiry addressing the high rates of mental health conditions experienced by first responders, emergency service workers and volunteers.

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Introduction:

I am Lyn Sinclair, former West Australian Ambulance Volunteer, Country Ambulance Office Manager and Paramedic preparing this submission, and welcome I the parliamentary Inquiry.

All subject matters and information are true and correct albeit some things may appear to those on the outside a little stretch of ones imagination.

My career began as an ambulance volunteer with St John Ambulance in W.A. a role in which I loved and wanted to expand my knowledge and skills so I chose to become a Paramedic. The best decision of my life, so I thought!

10 Years of my life were spent learning about interesting, exciting and nothing short of thrilling medical life saving skills. From day one I was known to be a 'shit magnet' meaning the big jobs would come my way they would test me and push me like nothing before. As a Volunteer you think you know it all, but when you train to be a Paramedic you soon learn you actually didn't quite know enough and in some ways that volunteer level of knowledge can be somewhat dangerous because there's so much more you didn't know.

During the course of my career with St John, like so many of my colleagues, I know I worked hard, studied hard and did my best to raise a young family, the 'job' (being a paramedic) certainly took it's toll on my family, my friendships, my relationships and it slowly clouded where my attention was directed, you tell yourself you're ok and nothing is wrong, you continue on job after job, day after day and then one day it all comes crumbling down around you, and you didn't even notice it happening, in your eyes all of sudden your life has changed forever..... Today I am one of the lucky ones who have found an empowering way forward post life in the 'job' with a rewarding new role in saving lives, a loving husband and wonderful children.

Some have not been so lucky!



Why Create Sirens of Silence Charity Inc.:

Sirens of Silence Charity Inc. Is a community of support for all emergency service personnel. It is my rewarding role post the 'job', In 2015 we lost too many colleagues in the WA Ambulance Service and my paramedic career had reached a cross road where my failing body could not cope with the daily physical routine of a Paramedic who was a 'shit magnet'

I was informed by my specialist that I would not be able to return to work as a Paramedic in the condition that my spine was deteriorating, I first injured my back in 2016 after what should have been a routine lift of a patient however this excessively intoxicated patient decided that during this lift she would try to jump off the carry canvas, injuring my spine that first time changed my life forever.

Over the next 10 years I continually reinjured the same site in my spine and would return to rehab over and over again, being injured in the ambulance service is like having leprosy, you're looked upon as 'faking' it, there's very little positive support from line managers, OHS teams and there is no specific 'light duties' roles that make you feel worthy, nor are the roles suitable for most injuries within the service.

Sirens of Silence Charity was born out of frustration felt from my own circumstances of what to do in life post the 'job', culminating with the suicides of too many colleagues, as well as an emotional reaction to watching the program 'Sunday Night' in Nov of 2014, the headline story was about NSW Detective Sergeant Ashley Bryant who phoned triple zero to record his planned suicide and to express his anguish about the lack of support for emergency personnel, the show left my husband and myself feeling devastated and wondering perhaps did we have the means and the ability to help make change happen.

If we sat on our hands and chose to do nothing, then how could we expect change to happen.



Only a week later we lost a male Paramedic colleague to suicide then less than a week after that a female friend and colleague Paramedic 'Marcia Vaughan' suicided at the Kalgoorlie ambulance station, Marcia had walked directly out of a meeting with management and stepped straight into the ambulance garage and suicided with toxic levels of her Paramedic drugs.

The recent deaths shook many close to the 'victims' and myself to the core, I state 'victims' because (confidential information has been provided to us since then) that three of the previous suicides within that 10-month period were victims of little to no support, bullying or intimidation from their management. All three had expressed this in varying ways prior to their deaths, but they felt no one with the power to end the bullying would listen or help.

Within the next two weeks my husband and myself set to work on how we could provide a safety support network for those who slip through their employment support services or choose to not go for help to their employer, by February 2015 we had created our idea into action which we called Sirens of Silence Charity Inc.

The charity is designed not replace the systems employers have in place but to add to it, we support those who feel they are not receiving adequate assistance from their employers EAP and those who do not feel safe to contact their employer EAP.

The principle aim of the charity is to support all emergency service personnel to engage with each other in creating a culture change to remove the social stigma that has long been associated within the emergency services.

We are now three and half years down the track and assisting more and more personnel with a multitude of mental health needs including professional support, educational programs and financial assistance. We work to positively support individuals based on their needs and goals. Whilst more personnel reported suicide attempts, those who chose to reach out have received our crisis support with the assistance of our preferred professional external services.



What do our emergency service personnel experience?

It's a given as emergency service personnel, that when you first meet people and tell them what you do for a living, their eyes light up with excitement and without a second thought ask intently and albeit innocently "what's the worst thing you've ever seen?"

Seriously, they want you to relive that worst experience over and over, without even a thought that it might actually be the worst thing you experience in your own mind all day, everyday, not even considering that it is keeping you awake at night, stopping you from interacting with family, friends and doing what you dislike most when you're struggling on the inside, being social!

Emergency service personnel experience horrendous scary and emotionally breaking situations daily, sometimes all day and let's not forget they also experience those incredible joyful moments too, however they're just that, a 'moment' in time that passes all too quickly compared to the tough stuff which I shall term 'situations' that stay with you.

In my time as both an ambulance volunteer and career Paramedic I have seen, smelt, touched and heard things that many of you may never experience, and honestly you shouldn't have to.

It was my job, I knew that but no training could have ever prepared me or anyone else for that matter how it would affect me for the rest of my life.

Should you ever have to accept and get over it? How do you get over it? A loving wife's face of heart breaking torture and yet hope, she's on her knees on the lounge room floor hugging her husbands leg tight as if to make him stay with her, my young student and I are performing CPR and trying to administer life saving drugs and shocks in an attempt to restart his heart, it isn't working, we know he's not going to make it and we have to keep going, keep the hope alive.



Emergency service personnel experience all levels of grief and relief. Arriving first on scene to bystanders yelling and directing you to hurry, only to face death in the eye, not only are you looking at death, you have to touch death to confirm it, the feeling you never forget, the smell you can't stop wafting into your nostrils, the sounds you can't ignore of bystanders and family wailing, the sorrow they feel touches your heart, you know if this was you, you'd be the same.

Death and trauma are a part of life for our personnel, not all death is traumatic and not all death is peaceful. The peaceful deaths have a different feeling, you're sad for the husband woken up in the morning and he's lost his wife of 50 years, you're holding back the tears as you imagine that's your granny, your family and your loved ones hurting. You're taught to be empathetic but not allowed to be sympathetic, how is it, that a human who spends their days and nights saving others can not be sympathetic?

The feelings of anger and bewilderment are some of the hardest to deal with; you don't have the answers, you can't explain how human behaviour can be so wrong. Can we ever comprehend the brutal rape and bashing of women, the double murder of young souls with injuries normally seen in horror movies, the babies that are burnt in acts of neglect, the young drug dealers bashed beyond recognition by the hierarchy and the innocent killed by a drunk driver, how can you ever become accustomed to this type of 'job'.

Joyous moments, how many are there? They aren't all that clear, perhaps only a small percentage of the total jobs. The good ones range from actually helping save a life to uncomplicated births; happy births, they can make you smile from ear to ear, feeling that euphoric high from childbirth is amazing. The joy lasts only as long as the next job isn't at the other end of the emotional scale. Soon that joyous feeling fades, but why doesn't the trauma?



What isn't changing the culture?

From the point of view of the charity, this is the one subject that needs the most attention from society and more importantly the employer, in the instance of this section the employer being St John WA., a large number of people who have contacted Sirens of Silence Charity Inc for assistance state they experienced some form of intimidation or bullying by either peers or management when being managed or reaching out for help.

A number of employees and volunteers of St John W.A. have contacted us confidentially to express they have experienced a lack of confidentiality where private information surrounding an employee has been shared openly with other figures of management or spoken about in an open office area of St John headquarters. This type of breach in confidence is preventing many from seeking assistance via their EAP for fear of disclosed information, retribution and a breach of trust with peers.

St John W.A. has faced no less than six reviews in just 8 short years, The Joyce Review – St John Ambulance Inquiry (2009), St John Ambulance Inquiry – Implementation of Recommendations (2010), WA Auditor General – Delivering Western Australia's Ambulance Services (2013), Phoenix Australia – St John Ambulance review of Workplace Mental Health Issues (2016), The Chief Psychiatrist Review – St John Ambulance Paramedic and Volunteer Suspected Suicides (2016) and The Independent Oversight Panel Review of St John Ambulance (2016).

The Independent Oversight Panel (IOP) review released August 2016 'St John Ambulance WA Health and Well Being and Workplace Culture' revealed that the panel reported that "submissions and hearings illustrated a culture where bullying appears to be systemic, if not condoned, and that it does not appear to be consistently addressed.

One officer in a management position reported being told they need to be more aggressive when dealing with Paramedics." Independent Oversight Panel Review of St John Ambulance (page 70)



To date the management structures of St John have not changed, the CEO is set to retire in October 2018, however the directorship which has steered the culture for the past number of years is still in place, how do you change a toxic organisational culture if you don't change your management? The IOP reported "The vast majority of the received submissions indicated that they had a lack of trust in middle and senior management (area managers, directors, general managers). Independent Oversight Panel Review of St John Ambulance (page 71)

Conflicts of interest are often expressed by members when contacting the charity, a number of separate contacts to the charity noted a conflict where the Country Ambulance Manager is the long-term defacto of the now named 'People and Culture' Director formerly known as Human Resources Director. The relevance of the perceived conflict of interest is noted in the next paragraph.

A significant number of St John Ambulance employee suicides and suicide attempts reported to the charity have been country employees, sadly employees who had been singled out, discarded, isolated, intimidated and placed on workplace performance programs with aggressive and unachievable goals.

One of which an employee had a meeting with management where she did not have a support person, this meeting lead to her decision to suicide only minutes later.

This same manager has been involved in a number of reports to the charity for bullying and intimidation. It is also reported in the IOP Review that "There are perceived alignments between individuals in management leading to a perception of a lack of impartiality". Also reported from the same paragraph in the IOP Review was "Perceptions seem to persist that there are senior managers who are above reproach and cannot be investigated, despite allegations of bullying or other misconduct against them". Independent Oversight Panel Review of St John Ambulance (page 71)



Many employees feel intimidated and choose not to speak out and to not put their names to documents in fear of retribution and confidentiality breeches. It is believed by Sirens of Silence Charity Inc. the parliamentary inquiry as with previous inquiries, may not receive the true reflecting number of submissions regarding what first responders experience due to the fear that their names may be published.

The IOP Review made Preliminary Observations of “The scenarios described illustrate an organisational culture that is not unique to St John and is reported to exist in many ambulance services. It is possible it may be related to it’s paramilitary roots and an inability to progressively transition to a professional standards based organisation”. Independent Oversight Panel Review of St John Ambulance (page 72)

It is the view of Sirens of Silence Charity Inc. that all emergency services have a paramilitary background and the culture of ‘suck it up princess’ behaviour still exists within all three emergency services in Australia. Although as time progresses and attitudes slowly change more strong willed and determined officers are coming forward to prevent further anguish and suicides of colleagues.

Organisations and Services need to accept change from the top down, practice what they preach and lead by example as employees can only do so much from the bottom up.

The time is now, life is too important to us all.



Conclusion

We have provided the 2018 'Inquiry looking into the mental health conditions experienced by first responders, emergency service workers and volunteers' an outline and only a snippet of what is experienced, from personnel – the Joy, the Grief, the Trauma and importantly the affect Bullying and Intimidation has on personnel, particularly within the Ambulance Service in W.A.

It is evident to the Sirens of Silence Charity Inc. that the perceived narcissistic nature of middle and higher management levels within in the services can determine a higher risk factor and poorer outcome of mental health conditions in its employees.

Many emergency service personnel feel they can condition themselves to deal with every person's worst day, every day but they cannot condition themselves to the fear, the intimidation, and the bullying or isolation tactics by managements.

It is the opinion of Sirens of Silence Charity Inc. that the difference between good management skills and a narcissistic management skills could mean the difference between life and death for some emergency service personnel, the nature of the 'job' for Police, Ambulance and Fire roles requires support from family, friends, and most importantly work colleagues and management than your everyday office job. The high adrenaline, fast ebb and flow of situations, high turn over of jobs and high fatigue impacts the human body more than is given credit for by some managements, employees can be instructed to source self care, but they also need motivating and nurturing support to feel the benefits of finding the right self care in prevention of serious mental health issues and suicide.

With good self-care, trusted management support and good external support networks we may just save a family from grief by saving a life of their loved one.

You have to ask yourself, after six reviews in eight years into St John Ambulance WA, why do we have to relive the trauma, the bullying and the past over and over with yet another review. Simply because the only changes have been cosmetic and superficial, the core is still rotten.



Appendix A

Giving a voice to those in need of help, all who wish to remain anonymous:

*“I’m a Paramedic,
I bleed like you bleed,
I feel pain like your pain,
I laugh like you laugh,
I cry like you cry
and I remember what I see,
I have PTSD give me a voice”.*

Written by a Perth Paramedic.

“Living the dream is also living the nightmare”

Written by a WA Police Officer



Appendix B

I worked for nearly thirty years as a frontline Paramedic. For the first twenty-six years, I thought I was fine, a well-respected member of the team. Three years before my realisation that I was ill, seriously mentally unwell, I began to doubt my own judgement. Second guessing myself and began thinking of things I could do other than front line work. However there was no option to move into another role and take a significant drop in salary. My employer didn't appear to value the old boys and saw us as just another resource on the roster. Moves into training were reserved for the up and coming youngsters, with no other options available I carried on.

Nearly a year later, I started to become obviously ill. I was short tempered and irritable with family and friends. I began seeking solace in the bottle, which became a drink every night, to several drinks a night, unless I was working. I began making mistakes in my work, forgetting my drug doses, which were expected to be known by rote. I didn't want to go to work. I feared attending another hanging, stabbing or murder. Every time I was called my heart began racing. Occasionally, a Manager might give a courtesy call to check on how you were doing, or the Wellbeing team would call in the aftermath, when you really just needed to get your head together. There was little or no support from the organisation, you couldn't trust them. They were well known for clearing out the deadwood and forgetting about you once through the door. The EAP system meant that after six one hour sessions, you had to tell the employer why you needed their help. The openness of doing so would single you out and within the organisation you would be seen as weak and miss out of representing them in their programmes. The programme



where they sent members of the business, to other countries or states to experience other organisations views or opinions. I applied for these opportunities and secondments which would have taken me from the front line, to be told I wasn't eligible, no support no other explanation.

A year after having experienced another horrendous job and not being debriefed or checked upon once more, I was facing a breakdown. At that time, I'd put so much pressure on my relationship, it was breaking down. I'd started seeing a psychologist and was working through so much, but the pressure was still there. Attending another incident, I had flash backs of the incident from the year before. It was like everything I had gone through 13 months before, was suddenly happening all over again, only this time in a world of fog and despair but I managed to convince myself I was fine. I wasn't.

I put my hands up and asked for help eventually. I was appointed a return to work consultant as I was now considered to be affected by a work-related illness and eligible for workers compensation. Workers compensation works well for physical injuries, but the same staff who deal with those injuries have very little understanding of mental illness or the fallout of attempting to push a square peg into a round hole. It was made very clear to me that the options for alternative duties meant exposure to the uniform, the environment and the same managers who were unsupportive prior to my injury. I wasn't well enough to understand that I needed to be taken away from all those triggers if I was to recover. The nightmare of being involved in the workers compensation system made the injury just as bad, the insurer simply wants you off their books as fast as possible.



The employer sees and treats you like dead wood. No one cares to be frank, nobody really cares about the impact of losing everything has on someone.

Mental health in first responders needs to be treated very separately to physical injury, there needs to be a review of the expectation of full recovery. There needs to be options to find alternative roles for those facing the end of their careers without losing at least half of their salary.

Things have changed in my life, I am no longer married, I struggle to maintain friendships or relationships, I don't live in my own home, but rely on friends and family for accommodation. I cannot do the only job I'm qualified to undertake, and I don't yet have an alternative job. I've tried to study, only to fall by the wayside. A year after leaving the job, I find myself trying to get back up only to fall over. I have yet another insurance provider, pushing for me to go back into the workforce as quickly as possible. On it goes, without the support of the employer who hasn't contacted me since my departure and a very uncertain future.

Written by a former Perth Paramedic.