



11 March 2020

Our Ref: 0704/20

Legislation Scrutiny Committee

By email: LSC@nt.gov.au

SUBMISSION – RETURN TO WORK LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2020

The Northern Territory Police Association Inc. (the Association) is the peak representative body for sworn Northern Territory (NT) Police Officers, including Aboriginal Community Police Officers and Police Auxiliaries. It represents all sworn ranks including the Senior Police Executive.

The Association currently represents over 1500 sworn Police Officers and it is recognised that our members are required to undertake some of the most challenging, dangerous, unpredictable and life-threatening work in our society.

The duties they perform expose them to inherently traumatic situations; situations in which they are exposed to scenes of abstract horror and violence. Police officers also face intense organisational pressures and stress in the workplace due to the nature of their role.

Emergency service work, particularly that which is undertaken by police officers, is not only different from other public sector work, but carries a recognised risk of exposure to situations that other workers would find traumatic. It is well recognised that police officers experience more stress related physical and psychological complaints than workers in most other professions, which can be attributed to the exposure to violence and trauma that is prevalent with the work they must perform.

Additionally, there are numerous work conditions that are unique to police officers, and (unlike any most other workers) their duties require them to make split second decisions while enforcing the law, ensure public safety and work in an environment that is dynamic, at times highly volatile, and has the potential for danger and life-threatening situations.

As such, this occupational group is considered “psychologically ‘at risk’ with higher lifetime prevalence rates of mental health difficulties such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than the general population.

In November 2018, *Beyond Blue* released the results of their national mental health and wellbeing study of Police and Emergency Services, known as *Answering the Call*. For the first time, real statistics were used from the 21,014 participants to provide unprecedented national data such as that on page 14 of their *Executive Summary*:

Northern Territory Police Association

Level 2, Suite 209 'Spirit on The Avenue' 12 Salonika Street, Parap NT 0820 | GPO Box 2350, Darwin NT 0801

ABN 36 709 591 145 | P +61 (0) 8 8995 9520 | E reception@ntpa.com.au | www.ntpa.com.au

- One in three employees experience high or very high psychological distress (compared to one in eight among all adults in Australia)
- More than one in every 2.5 employees report having been diagnosed with a mental health condition in their life (compared to one in five for all adults in Australia)
- More than half of employees indicated they had experienced a traumatic event that had deeply affected them during their work
- Three in four employees found the current workers compensation process to be detrimental to their recovery

Answering the Call also discovered that police and emergency services agencies were found to be among the highest risk organisations for exposure to traumatic events and the development of high psychological distress, PTSD and related mental health conditions.

It is the Associations position that exposure to traumatic events is not merely limited to attending the scene of the incident itself, but exposure to visual and audio evidence associated with those events both before, during and after the event as a result of the response, attendance and then the investigation process.

Unlike the general public who may only face one or two traumatic events in their life, police officers are regularly faced with trauma exposure throughout their career, and it is this cumulative exposure which results in mental distress, and often PTSD.

Many traumatic events faced by police are as a result of intentional human acts such as sexual assault, firearms offences, hostage situations, serious motor vehicle accidents and the death or serious injury of children, or natural disasters.

Additionally, our members suffer immeasurable stress as they not only face a high risk of assault and harm through exposure to communicable diseases (that may be transferred through attacks with syringes, bottles, saliva or airborne cough droplets) but are constantly exposed to danger, traumatic events, prisoner threats, conflicting task demands, short-staffed stations, court appearances, departmental enquiries and work in very isolated and remote areas.

In fact, the recent five-year average for our members being assaulted in the workplace is 230 reported incidents per year.

The Association submits that while the proposed amendment at Clause 24, Regulation 3 is supported in principle, the restrictive nature of the wording excludes the ability for many of our members to be considered under this legislation.

It is our view that the requirement for an individual to physically attend the site of an incident to qualify for this amendment, does not recognise the true nature of policing work. Workers such as the call takers who are located at the Joint Emergency Services Communications Centre are psychologically at risk, together with those from major crash, forensics, sex crimes and the child abuse task force just to name a few.

The restrictive wording excludes a portion of our membership who may develop PTSD from working in high risk areas who are suffering from genuine mental distress and fails to

recognise those members who suffer from vicarious trauma. It is the Associations submission that the wording in Clause 24, Regulation 3 be amended to provide protection for all police officers due to the unique nature of their work environment.

There is limited impact on our members resulting from the remainder proposed amendments and we thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the proposed amendments to the Return to Work Act 1986 and Return to Work Regulations 1986.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul McCue', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Paul McCue
President