

# Media Release



**Joe Szakacs MP**  
Minister for Emergency Services

Friday, 14 July 2023

## **Vital boost to mental health support for emergency services**

A significant investment into South Australia's emergency services will see more staff recruited to support mental health, programs strengthened, and new initiatives delivered.

The Malinauskas Government is investing \$1.9 million over four years for additional mental health and wellbeing support for emergency services volunteers, staff and their families.

The emergency services sector (ESS) has a workforce of over 16,750 personnel (about 15,170 volunteers and 1,580 staff) across SAFECOM, SA Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS), SA Country Fire Service (CFS), SA State Emergency Service (SES) and the Volunteer Marine Rescue (VMR).

This funding will enable proactive engagement and the development of targeted services for the more than 16,750 ESS personnel and their families.

The nature of first responder work inherently involves repeated exposure to trauma and stress. First responders are two times more likely to have suicidal ideation, are at a higher risk of developing complex mental health conditions, and are exposed to challenging and stressful environments, such as natural disasters, rescue operations and road crashes – e.g., serious injuries and fatalities.

In the last 12 months, the call rate to the Stress Prevention and Management (SPAM) Helpline increased by 129%. The SPAM Helpline is an employee assistance program that provides a confidential access point for volunteers, employees and their families for counselling and referrals to mental health professionals.

The funding will provide for an additional 3.5 FTE for roles leading work for:

- Extending support to children youth and family of CFS and SES Volunteers and staff.

- A new role within the child, family and youth mental health program, to include work with brigades and units to promote leadership skills of cadets and young volunteers.
- A new Volunteer Peer Support Coordinator to revitalise the existing peer support officer program. The program will focus on developing mentorship opportunities for officers, targeted skills and training development and increasing recruitment of volunteer peer support officers across the regions.
- The development and implementation of a leaders' training program to enhance their capability to manage mental health issues and increase their mental health literacy.
- Research and evaluation towards contemporary health and wellbeing programs, including a suicide prevention program and mental health first aid training.
- The implementation of an online mental health and wellbeing course accessible to all volunteers and staff.
- Improving accessibility and capacity of existing programs such SPAM and Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The funding will provide resources for proactive engagement and the development of targeted programs for the Emergency Services Sector and their families to achieve positive outcomes.

A key aim is to reduce the mental health stigma especially self-stigma that is a barrier to seeking help at the earliest opportunity.

It is anticipated the new model of operation will allow continuity and expansion of existing and well-respected program areas. The model will enable the proactive offering of support to volunteers, staff and families after traumatic events rather than waiting for a request to be made.

A recruitment process will commence immediately.

#### **Quotes attributable to Joe Szakacs**

*Our emergency services personnel are faced with distressing and stressful incidents daily.*

*It's crucial that our government does all we can to support our hardworking front-line personnel and their families with accessible support measures when they are required.*

*There is no shame in speaking up if you need help and strengthening this already successful SAFECOM-led program will ensure services are accessible and new roles are created to adapt to new challenges.*

*I'm incredibly proud of all those ESS personnel who have used this service and those selfless staff and volunteers who work within these programs to help others.*

#### **Quotes attributable to SAFECOM Chief Executive, Julia Waddington-Powell**

*The additional funding will be invaluable in bolstering the support available to our emergency services personnel. Expanding our programs to be more accessible, inclusive of family networks and targeting the destigmatisation of mental health are all positive steps to opening up the conversation and normalising seeking help.*