

# Bolstering Australia's disaster resilience through first responder early intervention strategies

The impact of disasters on the mental health and wellbeing of Australian communities is well documented, with some of those affected experiencing adverse psychological impacts long after the event.

Many of Australia's first responders are on the frontline of these events, and they, too, can be impacted. Not only by these events, but also through their day-to-day roles as first responders.

1 in 3 first responders, both paid and volunteer, experience high psychological distress. When compared to the general adult population, they face higher rates of:

- mental health diagnoses
- PTSD
- suicidal thinking and planning.

Families are also affected by their loved one's work and mental health issues.

## The need for independent early intervention and preventative mental health practices

- First responders face trauma during both disasters and routine duties.
- While agencies provide support, many first responders are reluctant to use internal services.
- While many first responders recognise trauma in others, they often don't recognise their own distress.
- Cost and waiting times are barriers to seeking private support, while there may be a sense that general community services may not fully understand the nature of the challenges of first responder work.



Early intervention plays an important role in reducing the impact of mental health issues and the impact they can have on people's lives. It helps to:

- equip first responders and family members to seek help early
- build tools for individual resilience and wellbeing
- improve agency recruitment and retention.

## Fortem's impact

Since 2019 Fortem has:



supported over **20,000** individual first responders and family members



hosted **3,800** social connection wellbeing activities



held **9,000** psychological and counselling sessions



provided career management services to **1,800** first responders



opened a dedicated **wellbeing hub** in WA for first responders and their families



expanded its outreach program to support more first responders and their families in **regional and remote Australia**.

Fortem advocates for and supports the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their families as they respond to the call and continue to protect our communities.

## Conclusion

First responder agencies play a critical role in disaster response and resilience, however, issues with attracting and retaining paid staff and volunteers can impact this capability.

Early intervention and preventative mental health practices delivered by independent organisations provide low-threat support systems that encourage our first responders to seek assistance before it's too late, while also supporting the family unit. This helps to strengthen the wellbeing and resilience of our first responders, therefore strengthening the resilience and capability of those agencies to better respond to natural disasters.

That's why Australia needs to ensure a collaborative approach to early intervention support coordinated by government and first responder agencies in close partnership with independent service providers like Fortem Australia.



## 5 Ways to Wellbeing

All Fortem activities are underpinned by the 5 Ways to Wellbeing framework, delivered in collaboration with the Royal Melbourne Hospital.



## More than nice to have: why is social connection important?

The research is clear that there are measurable and strong benefits to programs that are preventative and include socially connecting activities. These programs play a crucial role in supporting the wellbeing of individuals across Australia, particularly first responders and volunteer groups in regional and remote areas.

Social connection activities benefit first responders and their families by working towards reducing stigma of mental health issues, connecting communities – even in remote and rural areas, increasing opportunities to understand and access services available, and offer opportunities for first responders to recognise and respond to early warning signs of mental ill health. They can also be pivotal in preventing suicide and bolstering levels of resilience.

An emerging concept, social prescribing, a healthcare approach that enables professionals like GPs, nurses and social workers to refer individuals to non-medical, community-based services aimed at enhancing health and wellbeing, further acknowledges that factors like loneliness, stress and financial difficulties significantly impact health, and these challenges often cannot be addressed through medication alone.

Connection activities plus mental health literacy is a key formula in the success of Fortem Australia.

- 89%** of respondents felt that the activity they participated in benefited their health and wellbeing.
- 93%** of respondents reported the wellbeing activity they attended improved their awareness of their own mental health and wellbeing.
- 64%** of respondents felt that the activity they participated in strengthened their social network.

(The statistics presented are derived exclusively from respondents who completed the post activity survey between January 2023 and June 2024 (n = 1,462) and may not be fully generalisable to the broader participant population.)



## Sources

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