



Fortem Australia Annual Report 2024 – 2025



fortemaustralia.org.au



Fortem Australia acknowledges First Nations peoples and communities as the Traditional Owners of the land. We acknowledge and pay our respects to Elders past and present, and emerging leaders.

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Foreword

It is an honour to present Fortem Australia's Annual Report for the 2024–2025 financial year.

This report reflects the dedication, professionalism, and compassion that define our organisation's work in supporting Australia's first responders and their families.

Across the country, first responders serve with distinction in roles that are both demanding and deeply consequential. The nature of their work, often undertaken in high-pressure, unpredictable environments which requires not only technical expertise but also immense personal resilience. The impact of these responsibilities is felt not just by the individuals who serve, but by their families and communities as well.

Fortem Australia exists to meet these unique challenges with a comprehensive and preventative approach to wellbeing. Through evidence-based programs in social connection, psychological care, career transition, and mental health literacy, we provide tailored support that strengthens the capacity of first responders and their families to thrive, both during service and beyond.

Over the past year, Fortem Australia has continued to advance and diversify its service delivery in response to the evolving needs of first responders and their families. Notable developments include the establishment of the Fortem Wellbeing Hub, a dedicated space designed to foster connection and provide integrated support, and the launch of the Outreach Program, which extends Fortem's services to individuals and communities who may otherwise face barriers to access. These initiatives exemplify Fortem's ongoing commitment to ensuring that support is both responsive and accessible to those who serve.

On behalf of the Board, I extend my sincere appreciation to the Fortem team for their tireless efforts, and to our partners, funders, and supporters whose contributions make this work possible. Your belief in our mission enables us to continue building a stronger, more resilient future for first responder families.

On a personal note, I remain deeply moved by the stories of courage, vulnerability, and recovery that emerge from our community. They are a powerful reminder of why Fortem's work matters and why we must continue to advocate, innovate, and lead with compassion.

As we look to the future, we continue in our commitment to supporting first responders and their families through the continued development of evidence-based programs, strategic partnerships, and accessible support services that respond to their evolving needs.



Graham Ashton AM APM
Board Chair, Fortem Australia



A message from the CEO

The past year has been one of growth, resilience, and renewal for Fortem Australia. As we continue our mission to support the wellbeing of Australia's first responders and their families, 2024–25 has marked a period of deepening impact, expanding reach, and strengthening sustainability.

Across the country, the pressures on first responders and their families remain significant. From natural disasters to complex emergencies and the daily demands of community service, the need for practical, compassionate, and ongoing support is more critical than ever and it will only continue to grow.

This year, Fortem Australia delivered a wide range of wellbeing activities, clinical services, and community connection initiatives to those who stand ready to protect us all. Behind every statistic is a story of hope, recovery, and resilience, a powerful reminder of why our work matters and the lives it touches.

We have also made meaningful strides toward long-term stability and strategic growth. With the support of the Federal Government through the National Emergency Management Agency, alongside our philanthropic partners and corporate sponsors, Fortem expanded into new regions, strengthened our evidence base, and invested in innovative wellbeing and transition programs. These efforts ensure our support is not only immediate but enduring, helping first responders and their families thrive during and beyond their service careers.

Internally, we focused on reinforcing our organisational foundations. We enhanced clinical governance, implemented robust data systems, and refined our people and culture strategy to ensure Fortem continues to deliver services of the highest quality and integrity. I am immensely proud of our dedicated team and volunteers, whose professionalism and compassion define who we are.

Looking ahead, Fortem Australia remains steadfast in our commitment to building a safer, stronger, and more connected Australia, one where those who serve, and have served, are supported to live well. We will continue to advocate for national recognition of the unique challenges faced by first responders, forge new partnerships, and expand our evidence-based wellbeing and transition support.

To our partners, funders, and community – thank you. Your belief in our mission empowers us to stand beside those who stand for us all. Together, we are making a tangible difference in the lives of those who serve and protect.



Michael Willing APM
Chief Executive Officer, Fortem Australia



About Fortem Australia

Fortem is Australia's leading evidence-based not-for-profit organisation supporting the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their families.

First responder work is incredibly rewarding. But it can also be challenging. The work is often confronting, traumatic and dangerous, and that can impact the wellbeing of first responders as well as their families. Fortem's early intervention and preventative mental health approach aims to promote resilience, recovery, and overall wellbeing, while reducing stigma around seeking mental health support.

Since it was established in 2019, Fortem has supported over 20,700 individual first responders and family members. While Fortem works independently of first responder agencies, it collaborates closely with them.

Fortem is funded through a combination of government grants, corporate and agency partnerships and philanthropic donations. The majority of Fortem's funding is provided by the Australian Government's National Emergency Management Agency, and Fortem thanks them for their ongoing support. Fortem also extends its gratitude to all other supporters, which are outlined on p37.

Fortem Australia remains fully compliant with all financial reporting obligations, ensuring transparency, accountability, and adherence to regulatory standards. Fortem continues to uphold best practices in financial governance, with timely submissions and accurate disclosures in line with the requirements of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

Fortem's values

Everything that Fortem does is underpinned by 3 core values. This shapes the way the organisation works as it pursues its mission to support the wellbeing of first responders and their families.

Courage: To have the courage and resilience to live our values, speak honestly, be respectful, and demonstrate this through our behaviours and interactions with others.

Collective impact: To be committed to the organisation's purpose, acknowledge our challenges, build on our strengths, and collaborate across portfolios to achieve one goal: support the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their families.

Accountability and outcome focused: To accept responsibility for your role, make informed and considered decisions, be open and proactive in seeking new opportunities by having a growth mindset, provide constructive feedback, and embrace change with resilience.

Fortem's services

Fortem is Australia's leading and most trusted national service dedicated exclusively to first responders and their families. Fortem delivers essential on-the-ground and virtual social connection, wellbeing, early intervention, and preventative mental health strategies to ensure first responders receive vital support to enhance their resilience and continue protecting Australia.

Fortem operates through 3 interconnected branches, provided under a preventative and early intervention framework:

Social connection and wellbeing activities: Fortem offers a range of wellbeing activities designed to support the mental fitness of first responders and their families. Grounded in the latest scientific research, including the Royal Melbourne's 5 Ways to Wellbeing framework, these activities aim to enhance participants' resilience, confidence, and ability to manage stress effectively. By fostering trust in their own capabilities, Fortem empowers attendees to adapt to new challenges with optimism, promoting positive wellbeing outcomes.

Psychology and counselling: Fortem provides specialised psychology and counselling services tailored to the unique challenges faced by first responders and their families. Fortem's qualified and experienced clinicians are dedicated to addressing the psychological impacts of first responder work with empathy and expertise.

Career management services: Fortem recognises that each first responder's career journey is unique. That's why its confidential career management services are tailored to support individuals in navigating the next stages of their careers and lives. Available to first responders from eligible agencies, Fortem's career resilience support offers a variety of resources and services aimed at enhancing career resilience, engagement, and overall wellbeing.

These 3 branches are supported through a comprehensive Outreach Program, designed to ensure first responders and their families in regional, rural and remote Australia can access Fortem's services, and the development and delivery of mental health literacy resources which help inform and educate first responders and their families about mental health and wellbeing, while equipping them with tools to enhance their resilience and seek support when needed.



Mental health literacy

Mental health literacy is crucial for strong mental health and wellbeing. Fortem aims to increase and enhance the mental health literacy of first responders and their families across all portfolios of service delivery, including through all face-to-face and virtual interactions, resource development and delivery and via regular communications such as the website, newsletters, thought leadership and public engagements.

During 2024–25, Fortem created several new resources to complement the delivery of mental health literacy. These included a 16-page Wellbeing Resource Guide, later increased to 20 pages, a regular clinical blog, a burnout presentation and the development of a virtual mindfulness program with associated guidance material which was delivered by Fortem’s Clinical Services team.

By offering these resources, Fortem enhances understanding of mental health, helps facilitate early intervention, empowers individuals to manage their wellbeing, and fosters a supportive and informed community.



Proven results

Since it was established in 2019, Fortem has:

- supported over 20,700 individual first responders and family members
- hosted 3,000 wellbeing activities with over 60,000 registrations
- held over 9,000 psychology and counselling sessions
- supported over 1,800 responders through career management services
- spread community-wide gratitude through Thank a First Responder Day.

Our impact

In 2024–25 Fortem has:



supported **3,445** individual first responders and family members



provided career management services to **294** first responders



hosted **864** social connection and engagement activities



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



delivered **1,256** psychological and counselling sessions



expanded its outreach program to support **regional, rural and remote Australia**.

Key service areas

Social connection

89% of social connection participants agreed their health and wellbeing improved through the activity

99% are ‘very likely’ to attend another activity

99% would recommend Fortem

Career management

96.5% of participants would recommend the program to a friend or colleague

21% of all participants re-engaged with their agency*

90% of participants who completed the program reported they were confident or very confident in their capacity for work

*all participants include those who were undertaking aged retirement or medical separation from their agency.

Clinical services

1,256 sessions delivered to first responders and family members, including couples counselling

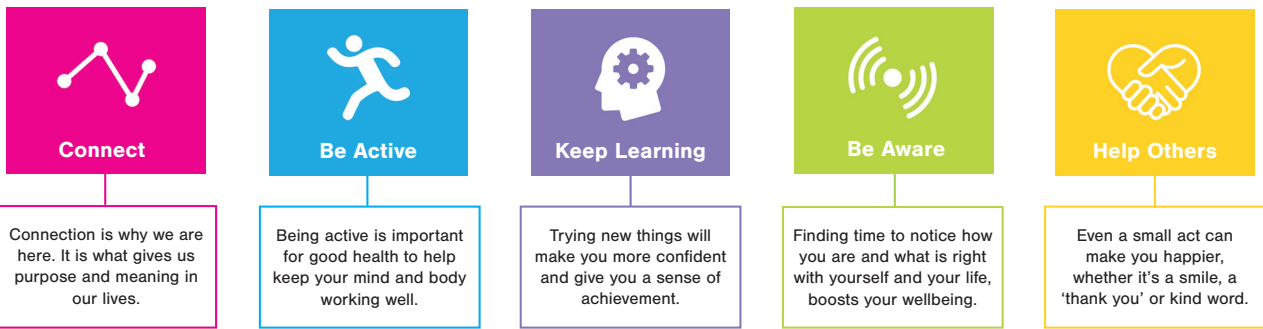
83% of participants with active PTSD symptoms showed a reduction of symptoms following treatment

Delivered **24** mindfulness group sessions to 19 first responders and family members

Social connection

Social connection is a key protective factor in mental health and wellbeing. Fortem’s free, evidence-based social connection program provides low-threat, low-stigma wellbeing activities for first responders and their families that are fun, varied and easy to access. They help first responders and their families to build resilience and boost mental fitness by supporting participants to trust in their own abilities and to adapt and cope with new situations while reducing stress. This enables them to engage in new situations with the confidence and optimism necessary for positive wellbeing.

All Fortem activities are underpinned by the Royal Melbourne Hospital’s 5 Ways to Wellbeing framework. Based on extensive international research, it includes 5 simple and effective ways to improve psychological and emotional health: connect, be active, keep learning, be aware, and help others.



In 2024–25, Fortem organised 645 wellbeing activities for first responders and their families, including both in-person and virtual opportunities. They ranged from large family gatherings to intimate coffee catch-ups, barbecues and morning teas, nature-based events, fitness challenges and classes, sporting and theatre events, arts and crafts, guided meditation and online trivia.

All activities are included in a calendar on Fortem’s website, with participants able to search and register for those they would like to participate in. Many of Fortem’s wellbeing activities have been made possible thanks to the support of various venues and corporate partners, and Fortem acknowledges their generosity and strong commitment to first responder wellbeing.

Through these programs, Fortem creates meaningful social connections and a supportive environment where first responders and their families can recharge and build lasting resilience.

This is supported by Fortem’s multifaceted approach to promoting mental health literacy and reducing stigma through the delivery of workshops, mental health literacy resources, agency engagements and community engagement events designed specifically for the first responder community, which will ultimately benefit the resilience of first responders and their families.

Volunteers

Volunteers play a crucial role in supporting Fortem’s work, including expanding services to regional areas by helping establish local networks and coordinating local programs. Their advocacy and promotional efforts also attract more participants to engage with Fortem’s resources, enhancing the overall reach and impact of Fortem’s mental health literacy initiatives.

During 2024–25, Fortem was supported by 25 volunteers from across Australia who facilitated wellbeing activities, provided peer support, took part in agency engagements and supported Thank a First Responder outreach initiatives, as well as administrative and other support.



Geographical reach

With services available both in-person and virtually, Fortem is accessible to first responders and their families in every state and territory in Australia, including in regional, rural and remote locations.

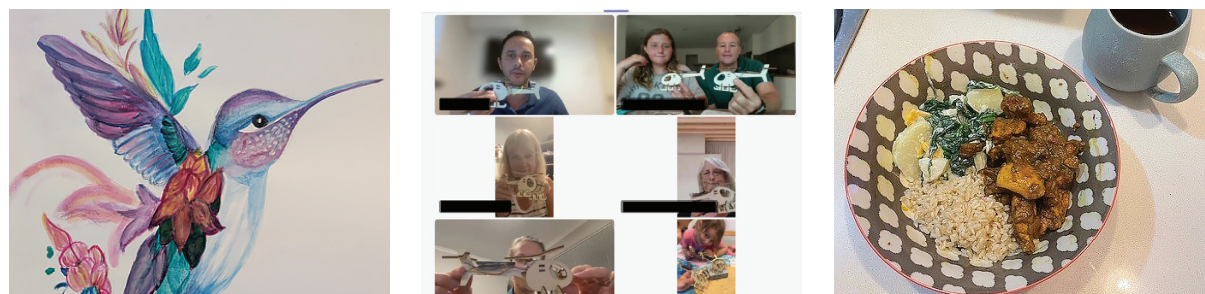
Fortem continued to extend its physical footprint in 2024–25, moving into South Australia for the first time. It now has staff and volunteers in 7 of the 8 states and territories, with discussions taking place during the reporting year about expanding into Tasmania.

In-person events were hosted by staff and/or volunteers in the following locations:

- Australian Capital Territory: Canberra.
- New South Wales: Greater Sydney and Wollongong as well as Bega Valley, the Blue Mountains, Central West, Mid North Coast, Monaro, Oxley, Northern Rivers, Riverina and the Southern Tablelands.
- Northern Territory: Darwin and Alice Springs.
- Queensland: Brisbane, Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast metropolitan areas, as well as Central and North Queensland, Rockhampton and the Darling Downs.
- South Australia: Adelaide and the Limestone region.
- Victoria: Melbourne and Gippsland.
- Western Australia: Perth, Yanchep, Mandurah, and Bunbury.

The expansion of Fortem’s Outreach Program during 2024–25 saw a substantial increase in the number and variety of virtual activities available to first responders and their families nationwide. While open to all first responders and their families in every state and territory, they are particularly important for fostering connection and community among first responders and their families in remote areas as well as others who might feel isolated. This aligns with Fortem’s commitment to nurturing resilience, strengthening bonds, and optimising health among first responders and their families, no matter where they are located. More information on Fortem’s Outreach Program is outlined on p23

The wide variety of activities offered virtually in 2024–25 included cooking, art and craft workshops, fitness classes, trivia, and more, with material kits sent to participants where relevant to enable full participation.



Participant feedback

‘I have been really struggling lately and feeling very isolated and lonely, disheartened and sad. Today’s coffee catch up helped me feel connected and heard. It also gave me the opportunity for a bit of a walk to the venue and back to my car on a beautiful day, so got me outdoors to enjoy the sunshine as I walked.’

‘Suffering from complex PTSD, it might not appear to others that I achieved much by attending but being able to achieve steps like this gives me opportunities I wouldn’t otherwise get.’

‘We learned so much and enjoyed spending time with fellow first responder families. It’s wonderful to connect with others in such a peaceful and inspiring setting. The kids loved it, and it was a great way for us all to unwind together.’

‘This type of activity has shown me how to recover from the stresses of first responder work. Without this, I definitely would not know how to switch off properly.’

‘I have been in a bit on a downer regarding mental health and exercise, I have not looked after myself recently. I registered feeling personally ‘committed’ because I knew I needed to go for me. I am so glad that I went – thank you!’

‘Connecting with colleagues outside of working hours makes me feel more at ease at work.’

‘Today gave me a chance to do something for me, to recharge, relax doing something that is not readily available in my area.’

‘This catch up connected me with numbers of colleagues who I interact with semi-regularly – but generally only in an operational (fire service) setting. So, to spend some time connecting in a more social setting was really helpful in getting to know some of these colleagues a little better and has also resulted in some great conversations, some of which have continued into this week.’

‘Painting the koi fish was a peaceful and meditative experience. It helped me relax and express myself creatively.’

‘I have been really struggling lately and feeling very isolated and lonely, disheartened and sad. Today’s coffee catch up helped me feel connected and heard. It also gave me the opportunity for a bit of a walk to the venue and back to my car on a beautiful day, so got me outdoors to enjoy the sunshine as I walked.’

‘I’ll be honest, I never really saw the point of wellbeing programs. That changed when my daughter, a paramedic and strong advocate for mental health, encouraged me to join one of Fortem’s surf sessions. After just an hour in the water, a coffee, and a chat with the group, something clicked. I felt a shift, lighter, more grounded. It was the simple power of movement, connection, and nature. When the surf series ended in April, I knew I had to bring that experience back to my team. Now, I run weekly surf meetups with about 10 to 15 teammates, some of them new recruits now into their third week in the water. Today, we invited Fortem to come and connect with our group. After a short presentation, a few waves, and a round of coffees, 9 out of 10 who were unsure about Fortem are now keen to stay involved. That’s the power of a personal invitation and shared experience. This is what community-led wellbeing looks like, and I’m proud to be part of it.’

‘Helped my partner leave the house. We both struggle to adjust in public settings.’

‘I can honestly say that I have enjoyed every instance of attending this activity. Each experience has been valuable, engaging, and rewarding, allowing me to gain new insights, connect with others, and further develop my skills. I truly appreciate the opportunity to participate and look forward to future sessions.’

‘Thank you for putting the event on, and for the opportunity to get together today. It’s just the start of the shift in my pathway – and I’m very optimistic and hopeful of what support Fortem are making available. Even just the recognition that responders have a different need is excellent.’

‘I just wanted to email and say a huge thank you for the work you and your team do. A night out to the theatre is exactly what my wife and I need after a challenging year. Thank you so much.’

‘It was such a lovely morning, out in the open picking strawberries whilst engaging with a work friend who is really struggling. I too am struggling. We both had so much fun, disconnected from everything bad, had laughs as we picked and ate the strawberries. It was just what I needed, so thank you.’

Program outcomes

Fortem’s wellbeing activities continue to have a significant positive impact on first responders and their families, as demonstrated by the consistently positive participant feedback received. Key outcomes included:

- Enhanced physical and mental wellbeing: Events such as surfing, pilates, and 10-pin bowling provided opportunities for physical exercise, stress relief, and mental relaxation.
- Strengthened community bonds: Social gatherings like coffee catch-ups, family barbeques, and paint and mingle events fostered a sense of community and support among first responders and their families.
- Improved inter-agency coordination: Participation in the multi-agency activities helped enhance collaboration and camaraderie among different emergency service agencies.
- Family engagement and support: Family-oriented events, including visits to aquariums, animal parks and caves offered enjoyable and educational experiences, promoting family bonding and providing a supportive environment for first responders’ families.
- Positive feedback and high participation: The diverse range of activities including the provision of virtual activities ensured high participation and positive feedback, with attendees appreciating the quality time spent with peers and family, as well as the opportunity to learn new skills and relax.



Gallipoli Medical Research

The reporting period saw Fortem’s social connection program move from being evidence-informed to evidence-based following independent research conducted in early 2025.

Gallipoli Medical Research undertook a detailed evaluation of the social connection program delivered between January 2023 and June 2024, assessing client demographics, program themes and metrics, and overall program performance.

It found the social connection program ‘is delivering strong social-connection benefits, trusted health gains, and exceptional participant advocacy’.

Some of the key participant findings included:

- 64% felt their personal network was strengthened by the activity. This is a key protective factor for mental health maintenance and crisis prevention.
- 89% agreed their health and wellbeing improved through the activity.
- 93% said the activity improved their mental-health awareness, validating the program’s educational value.
- 99% were ‘very likely’ to attend another activity.
- 99% would recommend Fortem to others.
- Fortem participants showed notably lower mental health stigma rates than typical first responders as reported in Beyond Blue research (26% vs 61% avoiding disclosure; 17% vs 36% reluctant to seek help).

While Fortem’ social connection program has always been designed based on best practices and general principles, this research provides concrete data demonstrating the positive outcomes it is having. It also allows first responders, their families and agencies to make informed decisions about using Fortem’s services.

Fortem acknowledges the support of the NSW Government’s Reconstruction Authority who co-funded the Gallipoli research project.

Clinical services

Fortem’s clinical services encompasses intake and triage, care coordination and waitlist support, alongside psychology and counselling. The program provides tailored support to eligible first responders and their families, offering care to individuals aged 14 and above, as well as dedicated couples’ counselling. Unlike community mental health services, Fortem emphasises timely, accessible, and proactive wellbeing initiatives. The approach prioritises resilience-building and early intervention, contributing to long-term workforce sustainability.

Since its establishment in 2019, Fortem’s clinical program has continually adapted to the evolving needs of first responders and their families. Standing apart from typical employee assistance programs, it delivers independent, evidence-based care shaped by first responder culture. As demand increases in both volume and complexity, a focus remains on reviewing delivery methods to ensure effectiveness, sustainability, and alignment with Fortem’s mission, while maintaining professional and legal standards for clinical practice.

Between 1 July 2024 and 30 June 2025, Clinical Service delivered 1,256 evidence-based sessions, of which 110 were couples’ sessions. In addition, 46 individuals accessed either waitlist support or care coordination. The total number of booked sessions reached 1,625, with an attendance rate of 77%. Across the year, 292 individuals engaged with the service.

The majority of participants were paid first responders (68%), followed by partners of serving members (14%), with the remainder being family members and volunteers.

The clinical team is highly skilled and committed to understanding the distinct challenges faced by the first responder community. Services are delivered both face-to-face and online, with telehealth accounting for the majority of sessions. A further highlight of the year was the continuation of the Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy group.

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy Group

This year saw the transition of Fortem’s mindfulness group skills training into a fully-virtual format, expanding accessibility for participants in regional and remote areas. The 8-week program was delivered 3 times in the second half of the reporting period, each generating strong interest. In addition, follow-up sessions were scheduled for graduates who wished to continue their practice and maintain connection.

Participants represented a broad cross-section of the first responder community, including early-career and soon-to-retire, volunteers, family members, and senior officers. For some, participation was a way to personally experience the program before recommending it to



colleagues, while others sought to strengthen their toolkit for managing stress and adapting to change.

Sessions were highly interactive, with participants encouraged to ask questions, reflect on their practice, and deepen their overall understanding of mindfulness. The online delivery model also allowed for breakout group discussions and the convenience of joining from home, which many participants valued.

For clinicians, the groups provided a unique opportunity to engage with clients outside of individual therapy and to extend both their knowledge and practice of mindfulness. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with all participants who submitted evaluation forms recommending that the program remain part of Fortem’s service offering.

Participants described the program as compassionate, supportive, and practical, noting that it equipped them with skills they could ‘add to [their] personal wellbeing toolkit’ and habits that were ‘long lasting after the program finishes’. Many highlighted the value of the group experience, stating that they felt ‘seen, heard, accepted and valued’ in ways that were often absent in the first responder workplace. One participant reflected that their goal ‘to learn ways to introduce mindfulness into my life’ was achieved, thanks to both the facilitators and the ‘other wonderful participants’.

Referral and demand

In total, 220 referrals were made across 27 agencies during the year. The highest referral numbers came from the Queensland Police Service (20%), followed by NSW Ambulance (18%), NSW Police Force (15%), and the NSW Rural Fire Service (8%)

Wait times and capacity management

Client wait times were consistently shorter than industry benchmarks, ranging between 1–2 weeks for individual sessions and 2–4 weeks for couples’ counselling. A unique feature of Fortem’s model is the optional waitlist support program, which nearly half of clients (43%) chose to access. Client feedback reinforced the value of this offering with many reporting it provided meaningful support during the waiting period.

Presenting issues and complexity

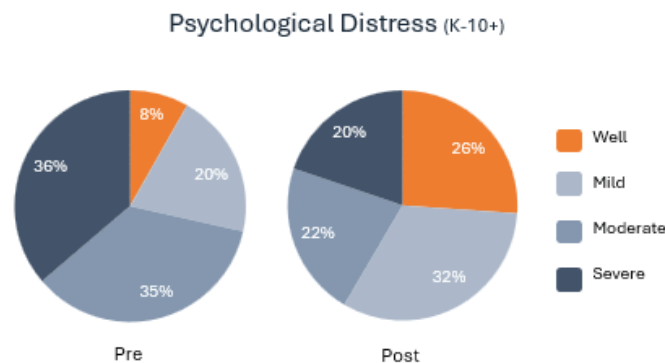
The most common presenting issues included stress, anxiety, relationship challenges, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression. Fortem’s emphasis on early intervention enables first responders to remain in the workforce while receiving timely care, potentially reducing the likelihood of compensation claims or early workforce withdrawal. The clinical team’s expertise in recognising how occupational and family stressors interact allows for services that are both comprehensive and uniquely suited to first responder families.

Program outcomes

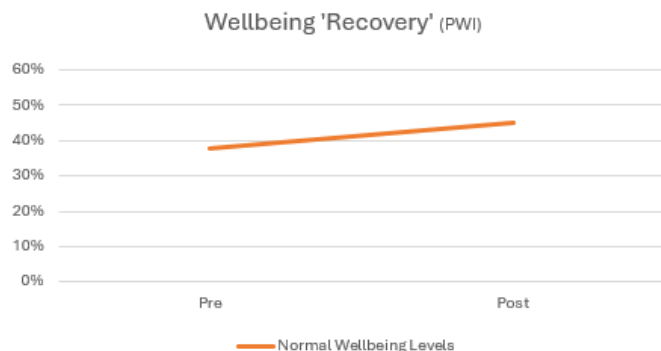
Fortem uses a suite of validated tools to measure outcomes, including the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ), Brief 2-Way Social Support Scale (Brief 2-Way SSS), Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), Personal Wellbeing Index – Adult (PWI-A), and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-2). Couples also complete the Enhanced Gottman Relationship Checkup. These tools balance the need for robust data with the importance of minimising participant burden, while also providing opportunities to benchmark against national first responder research.

Results demonstrated significant improvements across several domains, with post-treatment clients reporting lower PTSD symptom severity and improved wellbeing.

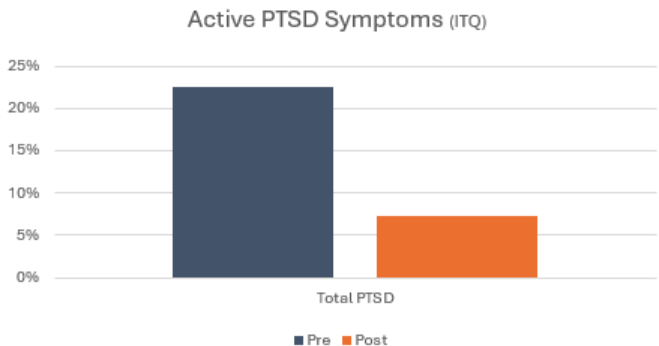
Feedback gathered via the Clinical Feedback Form consistently recognised the expertise of Fortem’s clinicians and their deep understanding of first responder culture. Clients regularly highlighted positive experiences from their first point of contact through to intake, waitlist support, and clinical care. These insights remain central to service development and continuous quality improvement.



Post-treatment results on the K10+ showed a reduction in psychological distress across all severity categories. The proportion of clients in the well to mild range increased, reflecting a shift from more severe levels of distress, while those in the well category grew substantially.



Post-treatment PWI scores improved in all areas, indicating stronger overall perceptions of wellbeing and quality of life.



Clients reported lower PTSD symptom severity after treatment, as indicated by improved ITQ outcomes.

Career Management Program

Fortem is committed to building resilience of first responders by providing quality career transition services while supporting mental health resilience and agency retention. The Career Management Program (CMP) entered its fifth year in 2024–25, delivering a comprehensive suite of career management services to eligible first responders who are transitioning out of service due to medical reasons, aged retirement, or voluntary resignation, as well as those seeking support to remain with or re-engage with their agency. Fortem commenced contracts with several first responder agencies in 2024–25, following the program’s transition to a fee-for-service and contractual provision model in 2023–24.

During the reporting year, the program continued to adapt and expand to meet the evolving needs of first responders, supported by a dedicated team comprising skilled professionals with lived experiences as first responders or significant experience working alongside them.

Of 647 enquiries from first responders across multiple agencies nationwide, 294 eligible first responders completed the formal intake process and officially joined the program. The team worked closely with these first responders to develop individual tailored transition plans, with participants benefiting from personalised support through Fortem’s



one-on-one case management model, facilitated by appropriately skilled and experienced career management specialists.

Key services included resume and career document writing, interview skills through individual coaching and group workshops, confidence building, job search training, comprehensive career analysis assessments, (identifying job options based on personal characteristics and values), recognition of prior learning (RPL) and skill assessments in partnership with industry leaders to align work history and education with formal qualifications. Additionally, participants engaged in monthly training and professional development workshops designed to enhance their employability.

Fortem delivered a diverse range of career transition workshops during the reporting period which were aimed at enhancing participants' employability and job application skills. Notable offerings included resume development, interview skills, government job applications, recognition of prior learning, and effective use of LinkedIn. This strategy proved highly effective.

Fortem continued to enhance its dedicated online client portal, featuring a greater range of resources tailored to the needs of first responders. The portal offers job skills training, resilience resources, resume and career planning tools, interview training, wellbeing support, transition assistance and a live job board, connecting participants with employers actively seeking first responder applicants across each state and territory. Most clients accessed the portal regularly, with weekly updates ensuring content remains current and relevant.

New initiatives

Retirement workshop

As part of its retirement stream, which supports first responders exiting service due to aged retirement or medical discharge, Fortem has introduced a dedicated retirement workshop. This bespoke workshop has been developed in collaboration with the Fortem Clinical Services team and is dedicated to supporting transition to and after retirement. Participants gain a better understanding of retirement feelings and what to expect with practical clinical-based strategies to manage the transition. Other topics include preparing finances and job-readiness.

CMP Mentor Program

One of the key issues identified for transitioning first responders is the anxiety they feel when taking the first steps out of service. To support program participants through this process, Fortem ran a pilot of a CMP Mentor Program from January to April 2025 which aimed to link participants with people in a mentoring capacity who have transitioned from service and, where possible, also completed the CMP and were working in an industry the participant wished to enter.

Mentors selected for the pilot were former first responders drawn from a range of roles and industries including senior managers in the public and private sector, information technology and cyber security, training, investigations and compliance, operations management, project management and community services, amongst others.

Following an evaluation of the pilot proving its value, the Mentor Program will be implemented within the full CMP in the 2025–26 reporting period.

CMP Bitesize

A new CMP Bitesize offering was launched in the reporting period to support the mental health resilience of first responders whose agencies do not have a contractual arrangement with Fortem. This bespoke and limited support, which includes mental health information and/or referral to clinical support, is provided via a single and free support session and aimed at fostering resilience and ensuring effective continuation with the agency or dignified transition options. Designed to assist first responders to develop their own strategy for career support, it provides a range of information and guidance to help their career planning.

Program outcomes

Fortem's Career Management Program has successfully empowered first responders to transition with dignity into the next phase of their professional lives. Participants have gained confidence, resilience, and self-worth, enabling them to approach their transition journeys with enthusiasm and optimism.

The success of career transition extends beyond merely securing employment; it represents a deeply personal journey. In 2024–25, participants achieved a variety of significant outcomes:

- 294 participants actively pursued their goals within the program.
- 224 completed case management support, were deemed 'job ready', and applied for jobs or opted for alternative paths such as education, volunteering, or self-employment.
- 28 participants secured new employment.
- 49 participants re-engaged with their agencies.

Notable success stories include former police officers who secured positions as compliance managers, investigators, operations managers, labourers, and QHSE advisors, illustrating the program's impactful role in career transitions and across industries. Fortem continues to receive engagement from public and private sector employers seeking first responder applicants for their available positions.

Beyond employment, many participants reported improved work-life balance and a renewed enthusiasm for their careers, contributing to their overall confidence and resilience. The CMP has collaborated with various external stakeholders, including Churchill Education and the College of Law Education and Training, to facilitate RPL and skill assessments.

While the CMP primarily focuses on transition support, 49 participants (22%) chose to re-engage with their agencies and continue their first responder careers after reflecting on their paths during case management meetings. Fortem Australia is committed to supporting all first responders, whether they decide to transition or remain in service.

Feedback from participants underscores the profound effect of the CMP on their lives. Many expressed heartfelt gratitude and highlighted the transformation they experienced.

Gallipoli Medical Research

Independent evaluation of the Career Management Program was conducted by Gallipoli Medical Research in the reporting period, assessing client demographics, program themes and metrics, and overall program performance between 2021 and 2024.

Gallipoli found the Career Management program (CMP) ‘not only helps first responders land new employment or reintegrate with their agencies, but also demonstrably boosts wellbeing and earns exceptional client advocacy; confirming its strategic value as both a retention and transition tool across the sector.’

The research marks the CMP’s evolution to being an evidence-based program and confirms it is meeting its intended outcomes. Key findings included:

- 70% of participants achieved positive outcomes – either completing the program or successfully re-engaging with their agencies.
- Mean Personal Wellbeing Index scores rose from 66.1 (challenged) at entry to 75.7 (normal) at exit, an average gain of 9.6 points, demonstrating enhanced psychological resilience at a critical career-transition juncture.
- 96.5% would recommend the CMP to a friend or colleague.
- A 4.4-point reduction in psychological distress scores and 9.6-point increase in wellbeing show the program delivers health benefits, not just employment outcomes.

Fortem Wellbeing Hub

In April 2025, Fortem opened Australia’s first wellbeing hub dedicated exclusively to supporting first responders and their families. Located in Western Australia and made possible through philanthropic donations, the Hub aims to support the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of first responders and their families by bringing together holistic health resources, modern facilities, and community connection under one roof.

The Hub hosts a range of in-person and virtual wellbeing activities for first responders and their families, as well as being a place people can just visit to connect. Its meeting and community spaces include a lounge, private rooms, a community garden where first responders and their families can unwind and reconnect with nature, and an outdoor studio which hosts mindfulness classes, art and craft sessions and other activities. First responders and their families can also access the health and fitness facilities of the co-located Mind Body Lounge.

In its first few months, the Hub hosted a range of agency groups and others to discuss service availability, including the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, WA Police, and St John Ambulance, as well as the WA Police Union.

Due to commence operations in the next reporting year (2025–26), will be a range of connected mental health services, including a general practitioner, a psychiatrist and a nutritionist. While operating independently of Fortem, these services provide important referral pathways for first responders and their families available both in-person at the Hub and virtually to first responder and their families located elsewhere in Australia.

The Hub also serves as the base for Fortem’s Outreach Program and volunteer coordination.



Fortem Outreach Program

Fortem expanded its Outreach Program during 2024–25 to enhance support for first responder communities across Australia, including those in regional, rural and remote locations. This ensures all first responder families feel connected and supported through daily life and in the event of natural disasters. This year’s outreach not only facilitated meaningful engagement but also significantly increased access to mental health literacy resources, wellbeing tools, and creative initiatives that foster resilience.

Key achievements during the reporting period included:

- Fortem distributed almost 1,000 Fortem Wellbeing Resource Guides to first responder stations in metropolitan and regional Western Australia.
- Fortem created and delivered 60 handcrafted Thank a First Responder Day gift hampers to rural and remote first responder stations across Australia.
- In collaboration with St John Western Australia, Fortem delivered 400 care packages to metropolitan and remote ambulance depots and sub-centers.

‘Everyone was stoked! It was great to see how appreciated they felt receiving a little something for all their hard work. The messages and booklets were especially heartfelt.’

As the Outreach Program continues to evolve and grow, it will do so using the following key underpinnings:

Referral pathways: Fortem maintains strong relationships with a wide variety of service providers across Australia, providing robust referral pathways for first responders and their families.

Education and training: Through mental health literacy and partnerships with registered training organisations Fortem empowers first responders to understand and support their own wellbeing, as well as that of their inner circle. Mental health first aid training both in-person and virtually spreads key knowledge across the country, including in hard-to-reach areas.

Peer support and mentoring: Fortem’s peer support and mentoring initiative allows first responder volunteers to connect with other first responders in a safe and non-threatening way, helping to break the stigma of mental ill-health, and creating a space for discussion between first responders. Peer support volunteers lead social connection activities and create space for in-person social support, while volunteers work to create an online space to reach first responders in regional areas.

Financial guidance: For first responders in the midst of financial difficulty, Fortem can offer referral pathways so they can access advice from experts in the field.

Post-natural-disaster relief: Fortem’s Outreach Program serves first responders during the recovery stages post-natural-disaster, providing support through external referral pathways to assist with providing holistic support for first responder families.

To support the work of the Outreach Program, a First Responder Working Group comprising first responders and family members will be established in 2025–26 to provide feedback on Fortem’s services and first responder community needs. This group, in conjunction with the peer support group, will lead the way for mental health reform for first responders by meeting with and reporting to Fortem on a regular basis.

By extending the reach to first responders and their families, Fortem ensures no one misses out on the support they deserve – no matter where they are in Australia.

Disaster recovery

Fortem plays an important role in supporting first responder wellbeing in disaster preparedness and recovery, recognising that many individuals are likely to experience long-term impacts following these events.

The objectives of disaster recovery response are to:

- provide meaningful social connection opportunities to reduce isolation, rebuild support networks, and foster a sense of belonging
- enhance mental health literacy through the distribution of Fortem’s wellbeing booklets and access to evidence-based resources
- build resilience and coping capacity through psychoeducation and practical recovery strategies.

Engagements in 2024–25 included:

Cyclone Alfred

With first responders from across Australia preparing to be sent to the Cyclone Alfred response, several targeted wellbeing activities were held with State Emergency Service volunteers in NSW and Queensland, as well as with the Emergency Services Agency in the Australian Capital Territory. Post-response activities were also delivered in Queensland and northern NSW.

Queensland floods

In the wake of severe flooding in Ingham, Fortem conducted targeted outreach visits to local Queensland Police Service (QPS), Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) and Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) stations, introducing available services and establishing direct referral pathways that will ensure first responders can access timely, confidential assistance throughout their recovery journey. This also provided an opportunity to distribute copies of the Fortem Wellbeing Resource Guide to improve mental health literacy.



NSW floods

In flood-affected parts of the Mid Coast, Fortem partnered with local libraries to deliver a community activation event in Taree. The gathering brought together 147 children, families and emergency services personnel to connect in a supportive environment. In Ballina, a relaxed community thank-you event was held as part of ongoing recovery efforts, supported by local council and community partners. Additionally, more than 350 copies of Fortem’s Wellbeing Resource Guide were distributed across flood-affected communities, including Bellingen, Nambucca, Yamba and Wauchope, delivering vital mental health literacy and increasing awareness of available support services.

Disaster recovery presentation

Fortem has commenced work on enhancing its impactful Disaster Recovery Presentation, tailored specifically to the needs of first responders and their families. The enhanced presentation will be delivered by one of Fortem’s experienced clinicians, offering deeper insights and more comprehensive, evidence-based guidance. It has also been adapted for both virtual and in-person delivery, providing maximum flexibility and allowing participants to engage with the content at a time and location that suits them.

The presentation focuses on:

- understanding and recovering from prolonged periods of stress
- recognising signs of exhaustion and burnout
- strengthening resilience and protective factors
- promoting long-term wellbeing and recovery pathways.

In addition, Fortem has commenced development of a Disaster Recovery Toolkit. This toolkit is designed to support recovery from sustained stress and will both complement the presentation and be equally effective as a standalone resource for those unable to attend. This ensures the maximum number of first responders can access this vital information and maintain their health and wellbeing on the frontline.

Delivery of the presentation and toolkit will commence in the 2025–26 reporting period.

Agency engagement

While Fortem operates independently of first responder agencies, it collaborates closely with them. During 2024–25, Fortem undertook significant work to grow and strengthen its relationship with first responder agencies, delivering over 200 agency engagements to more than 13,000 first responders.

Collaborating with agencies, Fortem met with senior leaders across various first responder agencies, while also organising station visits, presentations and in-agency social connection supports. These create a platform for open dialogue, education, and awareness around mental health and wellbeing, while also fostering a sense of community and support among peers.

The emphasis on social connection and prioritising personal health is crucial, as it can lead to improved resilience, reduced stigma, and a better understanding of how to manage stress and trauma related to their challenging roles. Such programs are instrumental in promoting a culture of care within high-pressure work environments.

Some of the agency engagements conducted during 2024–25 included:

R U OK? Day

Fortem organised several RU OK? Day events across the country during September, fostering important conversations around mental health and the benefits of simply checking in on one another. These events were warmly received by agencies, allowing Fortem to directly engage with hundreds of first responders and reinforce the significance of mental health awareness.



Joint Emergency Services Training Day, Northern Territory

Fortem attended a joint emergency services training day in the Northern Territory in October, engaging with 50 first responders who had gathered to share knowledge, and improve their collective preparedness for emergency situations.

Welcome and graduation events. Northern Territory Police

Fortem joined first responders and their families for the graduation events for several new squadrons. These events were instrumental for Fortem to build relationships and foster a sense of community and camaraderie with the new recruits.

Mental Health Week, Perth

During Mental Health Week in October, Fortem attended a multi-agency engagement event in Perth to promote mental health awareness and support among first responders from various emergency service agencies. Featuring workshops, discussions, and activities centred on mental wellbeing, resilience, and stress management, first responders had the opportunity to share their experiences, learn from one another, and build a supportive network across different agencies.

World Police and Fire Games Wellbeing Day

Fortem hosted a team wellbeing day for the World Police and Fire Games team at the Fortem Wellbeing Hub in May. This special event welcomed diverse emergency services members, some of whom had travelled from regional areas, for a full day of workshops and wellness sessions. With 15 participants, the program delivered practical strategies for stress management, resilience, and team cohesion.

‘The wellbeing day was insightful and provided valuable tools for managing stress and enhancing team dynamics.’

NSW State Emergency Service Wellbeing Day

Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM delivered a keynote speech to the NSW SES Wellbeing Day at SES Headquarters in Wollongong in October.

AFP Management and Serious Crime Program

Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM engaged with various law enforcement and first responder senior agency representatives as part of a panel on ‘crucible decisions’ alongside former NSW SES Commissioner Carlene York APM and NSW Marine Rescue Commissioner Alex Barrell ESM at the AFP Management of Serious Crime program.

Welfare Wednesday

Fortem collaborated with Fire and Rescue NSW on their ‘Welfare Wednesday’ initiative, designed to connect with a broad range of firefighters and help normalise conversations around mental health. The sessions feature the sharing of lived experiences from fellow first responders, alongside evidence-informed practices aimed at enhancing resilience and overall wellbeing.



Queensland Ambulance Service Regional Graduate Presentation

Fortem continued to deliver wellbeing presentations to Queensland Ambulance Service recruits, providing practical tools to support mental health and resilience as they begin their careers. The sessions introduce evidence-based strategies for managing stress and maintaining wellbeing, along with information on how to access relevant support services and mental health resources.

Presentation to trainee Fire and Rescue officers, NT

Fortem presented to trainee fire and rescue officers in the Northern Territory, highlighting the wide range of wellbeing supports available to first responders and their families. This engagement reinforced the value of early and continued connection with personnel, ensuring they are equipped with the knowledge and tools to access support throughout their careers.

Marine Rescue Leadership Forum

Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM provided the keynote speech to the Marine Rescue Leadership Forum in May, talking about his own first responder journey which led him to Fortem, as well as providing information on Fortem’s purpose and the services it provides to support first responders and their families.

NSW Ambulance training day

Fortem CEO Michael Willing addressed paramedics and other staff at the NSW Ambulance South-East Region training day, sharing information on the importance of wellbeing and good mental health and the support services that Fortem offers.

Port Macquarie Emergency Services Ball

Fortem was invited to attend and speak at the inaugural Port Macquarie Emergency Services Ball, which brought together paramedics, firefighters, police officers, and other frontline responders for an evening of connection, recognition, and celebration. The ball offered a meaningful opportunity to acknowledge their shared commitment to community safety and wellbeing. Fortem was proud to be part of this important initiative.



Queensland Ambulance Service Regional Counsellors Conference

Fortem participated in the QAS Regional Counsellor Conference in Brisbane, which brought together more than 30 internal and external counsellors from across Queensland. The session provided an opportunity to showcase Fortem’s services and highlight existing agency collaborations. This engagement reinforced the value of integrated support pathways, ensuring first responders can access the right support at the right time.

Queensland Police Service Recruit and Family Wellbeing

Fortem delivered presentations to more than 150 recruits and their families, focusing on the importance of proactive mental health care, resilience-building, and maintaining wellbeing throughout a policing career. The presentation includes practical strategies, real-life examples, and clear pathways to access support services and mental health resources, equipping QPS members with the tools to manage the unique challenges of frontline work.

Gold Coast first responder family day

Fortem was invited to attend a QPS-organised Family Information Day on the Gold Coast aimed at supporting first responder families. The event provided a valuable opportunity to share information about Fortem’s services, promote available support options, and foster connection among first responder families. Fortem’s presence contributed to a welcoming environment that encouraged open conversation, helped reduce stigma around seeking support, and strengthened community ties by helping first responder families connect with one another.

Victoria Police Academy

Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM together with representatives from the clinical and social connection teams presented to 100 recruits and staff at the Victoria Police Academy, showcasing Fortem and its services.



Advisory Board

Fortem’s Advisory Board comprises leaders within the first responder sector who volunteer their time to play a crucial role in supporting Fortem to tailor initiatives to the unique needs of first responder groups, and to advocate for these programs to promote broader community awareness and adoption, strengthening trust and credibility within the sector.

During 2024–25, Fortem held 4 Advisory Board meetings.

Advisory Board members as at 30 June 2025 were:

- Chair: Tracy Linford APM, Queensland Police Service
- Mark Armstrong CSC, Queensland State Emergency Service
- Rashelle Conroy APM, NSW Police Force
- Belinda Dryden, Queensland Police Service
- Jeremy Fewtrell AFSM, Fire and Rescue NSW
- Drew Hebbbron MBA GAICD, Queensland Ambulance Service
- Scott Lee APM, ACT Policing
- Ian Parrott, South Australia Police
- Debbie Platz, NSW State Emergency Service
- Andrew Short AFSM, Queensland Fire & Emergency Services and Rural Fire Service (retired)
- Kyle Stewart APM, NSW Rural Fire Service

The insights of the Advisory Board members help refine strategies that provide comprehensive and effective support for first responders and their families, fostering a resilient and well-supported workforce capable of withstanding the demands of their roles. They also help ensure Fortem’s programs and services align with current best practice and address the real challenges faced by first responders, directly contributing to improved mental health and resilience.

Community and stakeholder engagement

While Fortem works directly with first responders and their families, first responder agencies, unions and the mental health sector, it also works more broadly across the community, raising awareness of the mental health and wellbeing challenges that first responders and their families can face, while also reducing stigma about mental ill health and help-seeking behaviours. Fortem also partners with corporate partners, local government and other not-for-profit organisations to enhance its work supporting first responders and their families.

Thank a First Responder Day

Thank a First Responder Day was held on Wednesday 11 June 2025. Led by Fortem, this national day of action acknowledges the vital work of first responders and their families, connecting them with expressions of gratitude from the community. It is a day to celebrate first responders and their families through various events and activities held on the day and throughout the surrounding weeks.

This year's Thank a First Responder Day was preceded by 10 days of gratitude from 1 June 2025 to provide greater community reach, amplify the appreciation felt by first responders and their families, and further reinforce the importance of their wellbeing.

Fortem led 62 Thank a First Responder Day events nationally for first responders and their families, including barbecues and morning teas, family fun days, sporting games and virtual activities. Countless messages of gratitude from the community were shared with first responders and their families.

This was supported by a comprehensive social media and media campaign which resulted in over 32 million impressions nationally, ensuring the community at large was aware of the significance of the day.

Fortem acknowledges many event partners and corporate sponsors who helped make this year's event a success.



Community involvement

As in previous years, Fortem reached out to schools, councils, community groups, members of parliament and first responder agencies encouraging their participation in Thank a First Responder Day. This resulted in more than 400 registrations as Thank a First Responder Day supporters.

The reach out to schools, in particular, helped to raise awareness among younger members of the community about the critical roles first responders play, while also fostering a culture of gratitude and respect for their services. This can have a ripple effect, as students may carry the message home, further spreading the importance of acknowledging the dedication and hard work of first responders.

These community-driven initiatives are vital in building strong, supportive relationships between the public and emergency service personnel, and saw Thank a First Responder Day supporters host hundreds of activities and events around the country.

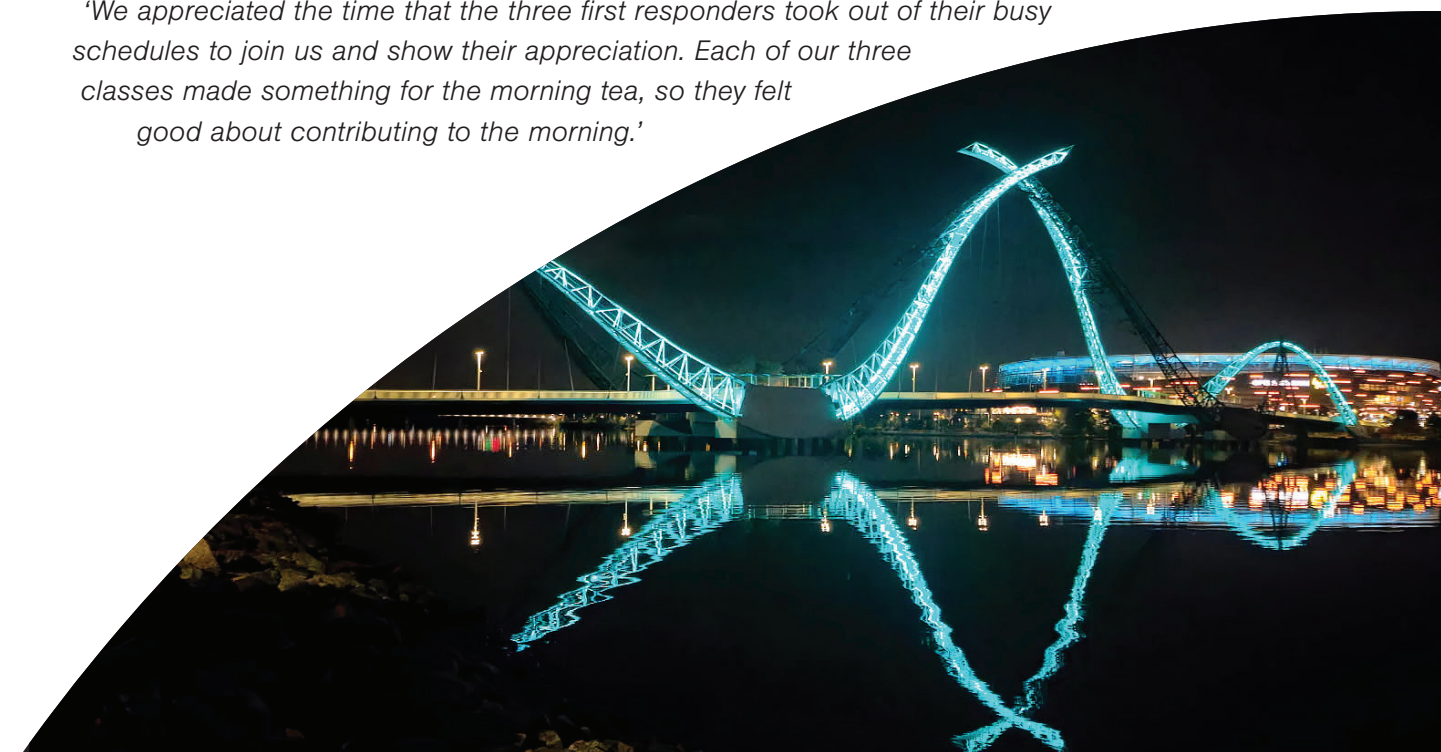
Schools who participated in the campaign were able to register to receive the book *It's Just Work Stuff* by Stewart Williams, an incredible mental health literacy resource for the children of first responders that is now in hundreds of school libraries across the country.

'I have been in education for close to 20 years. This event was the most rewarding I have been a part of and has built connections with the local community in the most honest and heartfelt way.'

'It helped our children connect with first responders and get an understanding of what their roles in the community are. It also helped make our first responder families feel a sense of belonging and community while allowing children of first responders to connect, discuss and share their experiences, knowledge, worries and thoughts with other children of first responder families.'

'By bringing together colleagues, and frontline workers, we fostered meaningful connection and shared gratitude – simple yet powerful acts known to bolster mental health and resilience for those who often face tough, traumatic situations.'

'We appreciated the time that the three first responders took out of their busy schedules to join us and show their appreciation. Each of our three classes made something for the morning tea, so they felt good about contributing to the morning.'



'It was wonderful to show our appreciation to the first responders in our area and to remind them that we really appreciate all that they do and given most of the roles are of a volunteer basis. It was also beneficial for the children in our preschool to understand that they help us in times of need and put faces to the occupations that we often talk about.'

'We are honoured to support such a meaningful initiative that acknowledges and uplifts the mental health and wellbeing of our first responders and their families. It was a privilege for our campus to participate, and we are proud to stand with your organisation in showing gratitude to those who serve our communities so selflessly.'

The impact of gratitude

Expressions of gratitude from the public significantly impact first responder resilience, community resilience, and social recovery. Gratitude boosts the morale and commitment of first responders, reinforcing their dedication to their roles. It also fosters stronger bonds between the community and emergency service personnel, creating a supportive environment that enhances overall social recovery and community resilience.

By recognising and appreciating the efforts of first responders, communities contribute to their mental health and wellbeing, ensuring they remain resilient and capable in the face of ongoing challenges.

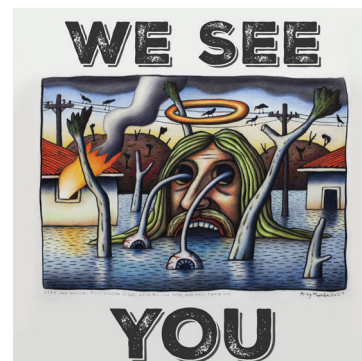
We See You

We See You, an album of 10 songs written for and about first responders and their families, was released in November 2024. Curated by Fortem ambassador and renowned Australian music artist and producer, author and filmmaker Paul Field AM, We See You, features some of Australia's most talented musical artists, including Kevin Bennett, Felicity Urquhart and Josh Cunningham, Dog Trumpet, Shane Nicholson and The Wiggles. Its purpose was to say to first responders, 'We see you, and we appreciate what you do'.

As well as raising awareness about the incredible work first responders do in the community, the album also serves as a fundraiser for Fortem, with profits from sales of the physical CD supporting Fortem's work.

'After 18 years as a volunteer first responder I have the greatest respect for our first responders. I carry with me the scars and ghost of my time, but I would give anything to still be able to be one. I teach my Grandchildren to thank them for their service.'

'To the SES, Ambulance, Fire Brigades, Police you are all amazing, stay safe and THANK YOU. You are all always in my prayers.'



'My son is a cop (WAPOL) who work in the country. One week, he was in Perth for a training course. He came to visit us and while he was home, my husband had a seizure and stopped breathing. My son immediately jumped into action with CPR and called 000 while I could only watch and cry. Multiple ambos arrived with 5 mins. If the stars hadn't aligned, my husband wouldn't be here today. I'm forever thankful for my son's training and that of the Ambos.'

Community events

Walk Off the War within Darwin

Fortem engaged with both first responders and members of the community during and after this event, hosting a stall which provided an excellent opportunity to educate event participants about Fortem's work supporting first responders and their families.

ReBoot in Bermagui

The ReBoot in Bermagui Festival is an annual event that allows the community to reactivate and re-energise by the sea. Fortem took several first responder families along to try the wide range of wellbeing activities the festival has to offer, including a coastal fun run, first responder tug-o-war challenge, golf, barefoot bowls and a beach breakfast, while also engaging with the broader community.

Community Recovery Network

Fortem engaged closely with the Community Recovery Networks in Ballina and Lismore who have been instrumental in supporting flood-affected communities following severe weather events. This has extended to working with Fortem to support first responders.

Australian Open Golf

With the support of Fujitsu Australia, Fortem attended the 2024 Australian Open in Melbourne in November, hosting several wellbeing events for first responders and their families while also engaging with the community about Fortem and the services it delivers. Through Fujitsu's support, Fortem was the recipient of the Australian Open Charity Golf Day, which also provided an exceptional opportunity to engage with business leaders and others high-profile participants about Fortem's work.



Rottnest Channel Swim

The Rottnest Channel Swim in February saw a team of 4 swimmers, led by Fortem Ambassador Peter Henry, compete in the gruelling 19.5km race, while also raising money for Fortem. The event also provided an opportunity for Fortem to engage with the community audience of about 10,000 people about Fortem’s work.

‘Taking part in the Rottnest Swim was a powerful experience for us all. It was amazing to see the Fortem team push through such a demanding challenge, and it felt great knowing that the funds raised would support our fellow first responders. The teamwork and dedication were inspiring, and it was a reminder of how important it is to come together as a community, especially when it comes to supporting mental health. It was a tough swim, but the sense of achievement and the impact it will have on others made it all worth it.’



Gold Coast Police Charity Golf Day

Fortem was one of 3 charities of choice at the annual Gold Coast Police Charity Gold Day in April, providing an opportunity to engage with participants, including both first responders and members of the community.



Queensland Emergency Services Expo

Fortem attended the Emergency Services Expo in South-east Queensland, an event that welcomed over 1,000 community members. Fortem’s presence highlighted the vital contributions of first responders and reinforced the importance of recognising and supporting those who serve our communities. As part of the engagement, Fortem invited attendees to share personal messages of thanks, collecting hundreds of heartfelt notes to be passed on to first responders as a powerful reminder of the community’s appreciation and support.

Corporate engagement

During the reporting period, Fortem partnered with various corporations who provided financial or in-kind support to further Fortem’s work supporting first responders and their families. Major partners included Mind Body Lounge, which has played a critical role in the development and delivery of the Fortem Wellbeing Hub in Western Australia, and Fujitsu Australia, which has provided technical and professional support while also hosting numerous social connection activities, fundraising on behalf of Fortem, and providing volunteer support on Thank a First Responder Day.

Our full supporter list for 2024–25 is below:

Major partners

- Mind Body Lounge
- Fujitsu Australia

Corporate supporters

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Akkodis Australia | • Launchpad Digital |
| • Australia Post | • MediaCast |
| • Australia Zoo | • MinterEllison |
| • Bunnings | • Murcotts Driving Excellence |
| • Giants AFL | • P3 Recovery |
| • KPMG | • Taronga Western Plains Zoo |

Fortem thanks these corporate partners for their support throughout 2024–25.

Not-for-profit partnerships

Fortem collaborated closely with several not-for-profit organisations across the reporting period to share information, reach new audiences and provide cross-promotional opportunities. They included:

- Australian Bibliotherapy Foundation
- Dogs for First Responders
- When No-one is Watching

Marketing and communications

Website

The Fortem website is a key communication channel that allows first responders and their families, as well as the general community, to find out about Fortem and engage with its services. Fortem has continued to improve content and the user experience throughout the reporting period. The website attracted 79,000 users, with the majority – over 67,000 – located within Australia. The highest user activity was in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra, reflecting the strong connection with key urban communities.

Traffic sources and engagement: The website’s reach was driven by a combination of direct visits (58,000 users) and organic search traffic (32,000 users), showcasing effective brand recognition and a robust online presence.

Top pages visited: The homepage and program-specific pages were the most frequently visited, highlighting the value users find in accessing Fortem’s core services and information. User access was almost evenly split between desktop (57%) and mobile (41.7%), with minimal use of tablets, indicating versatile engagement across devices.

Resource utilisation: There were 14,550 downloads in 2024–25, demonstrating active engagement with and reliance on the resources Fortem provides to support first responders and their families. Top downloads include:

- Identity and career transition
- Wellbeing Resource Guide
- Supporting children through trauma

These metrics underscore Fortem’s expanding digital footprint and the meaningful engagement fostered with its audience. The substantial web traffic and active participation across social media platforms highlight the effectiveness of communication strategies and the genuine connection Fortem has cultivated within the first responder community.

Social media engagement

-  Facebook: Reached 475,644 users, with over 8,258 interactions, illustrating significant community connection.
-  Instagram: Experienced notable growth with a reach of 77,073, signifying expanded audience engagement.
-  LinkedIn: Reached an audience of over 159,000 with 283,998 impressions, representing an impressive engagement rate of 8.18% which reflects strong professional interest in Fortem’s mission and activities.

Media engagement

Fortem engages regularly with media, distributing media releases to local and national media, and participating in interviews across radio, print and television. Notable appearances during the reporting period included:

- The Daily Telegraph featured an interview with Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM, focusing on the path that saw him take up the role.
- A Current Affair ran a story on the release of the album *We See You*, which featured interviews with Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM, Fortem ambassador Paul Field, and artists from the album. Paul was also interviewed by a number of other outlets.
- Ch 7 Sydney interviewed Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM about the tragic suicide of a serving police officer and the importance of targeted support services for first responders and their families.
- The Dubbo Liberal featured a story on Fortem ambassador Mark Meredith, focusing on his career, his lived experience and his commitment to making a difference.
- Berwick Star News and Southern FM interviewed Fortem ambassador Matthew Lamberth about his journey with PTSD and his commitment to helping others.
- Numerous interviews were conducted by Fortem staff and ambassadors with national, regional and local media outlets as part of the Thank a First Responder Day campaign, resulting in over 600 media mentions.

Featuring in prominent media outlets continually positions Fortem as a thought leader in the field of first responder support, while also raising awareness about Fortem’s services and the importance of providing mental health and wellbeing support for first responders and their families.



Newsletters

Fortem delivers a bi-monthly newsletter to subscribers to share mental health literacy resources, while also providing news updates, information about upcoming activities and initiatives, and raising awareness of the services Fortem offers. This consistent communication also nurtures a sense of community and trust, promoting greater participation and support for Fortem’s programs, while also reaching a broader audience that includes policy makers, potential donors, and community members, enhances Fortem’s ability to influence and drive change.



Podcasts

Fortem contributed to several podcasts during 2024–25, including:

- Connect with Confidence with Kerrie Phipps
- Unnecessary Harm
- Motive & Method with Dr Xanthe Mallett and criminal psychologist Tim Watson-Munro
- Priority Zero with Oresti Rakkas
- The Emergency Edit with Elisabeth Goh
- Secret Sunday with Ashlee Thomas

These interviews further disseminated Fortem’s insights and strategies for supporting first responders.

Conferences and speaking engagements

Conferences and speaking engagements play an important role in increasing mental health literacy among first responders and providing tangible strategies to enhance their resilience. It also enables Fortem to anchor itself as the leading organisation in resilience-building services for first responders and their families, reinforcing Fortem’s position at the forefront of this vital work.

Opportunities undertaken in 2024–25 included:

Australian Local Government Association’s National General Assembly

Fortem engaged with over 1,200 leaders from local, state and Commonwealth governments, as well as key supporting industries at this event, through an exhibition booth aimed at strengthening connections, and through participation in a disaster resilience panel alongside Commonwealth Government leaders and prominent policy experts. The panel explored critical topics such as building social infrastructure and enhancing the resilience of volunteer first responders. This platform provided an excellent opportunity to elevate Fortem’s profile as a key player in disaster resilience, recruitment, and retention.

2024 Disaster and Emergency Management Conference

Fortem delivered the presentation, *From Policy to Action: Bridging the Gap for a Resilient Disaster Workforce*, which underscored the essential role non-government organisations play in translating government disaster policies into practical outcomes. The conference attracted 700 in-person and 500 online delegates, raising significant awareness of Fortem’s services.

Leadership in Counter Terrorism (LinCT) Conference

Fortem CEO Michael Willing APM engaged with numerous senior representatives of law enforcement and first responder agencies at the Leadership in Counter Terrorism (LinCT) Conference at the Gold Coast, Queensland.

Frontline Mental Health Conference

Fortem attended the Frontline Mental Health Conference on the Gold Coast in March which provided a valuable opportunity to engage directly with wellbeing professionals and agency leaders from first responder organisations across the country. These meaningful conversations have already led to several new opportunities, including an invitation to participate in the Emergency Services Network of South Australia, which brings together wellbeing representatives from all major emergency service agencies.



Policy and advocacy

Throughout 2024–25, Fortem continued to work towards influencing policy reform and advocating for the needs of first responders and their families at a local, state and national level. This continues to be pivotal in advancing key initiatives aimed at fostering resilience, wellbeing, and capability within the first responder community.

Early in the reporting year, Fortem prepared and submitted a comprehensive policy whitepaper to the National Emergency Management Agency highlighting the vital role of volunteer emergency services in bolstering community resilience, addressing key issues such as the roles of government in disaster management, the significance of social connections in disaster recovery, and the pressing challenge of volunteer retention.

Other key policy and advocacy activities included:

- Participation in the NEMA Higher Risk Weather Season Preparedness Briefing – Not-For-Profit and Volunteer Organisations.
- Participation in the NEMA Charitable, Not-for-Profit and Philanthropic Disaster Resilience Roundtable.
- Offering support for first responder and family wellbeing to the relevant ministers following in NSW and Queensland following Cyclone Alfred.
- Meetings with relevant members of parliament (state and federal) about Fortem’s work supporting first responders and their families.

Ambassador engagement

Fortem’s ambassadors are powerful advocates for both first responder mental health and wellbeing and for raising awareness of the work Fortem does supporting first responders and their families. They volunteer their time to share their messages and lived experiences to foster connection and understanding around the importance of mental fitness for long-term health and wellbeing. Fortem thanks them for their unwavering commitment.

During 2024–25, Fortem welcomed the following new ambassadors:

- Mark Meredith APM OAM, retired police officer and suicide prevention advocate
- Ashley Mullaney, Channel 7 news reporter
- Matthew Lamberth BM, retired police officer and PTSD awareness advocate

The reporting period saw Fortem expand its engagement with the ambassador cohort, introducing biannual briefings and bi-monthly newsletters to enhance connection and share information.

Key ambassador activities undertaken during the reporting period included:

- Fortem ambassador and active first responder Latisha Whalan was featured on the R U OK? ‘Are They Triple OK?’ podcast which shares inspiring stories and offers valuable insights into the challenges first responders face, while highlighting the importance of mental wellbeing.
- Fortem ambassador Paul Field curated the *We See You* album, released in November, which provided an opportunity to promote Fortem and its work while also encouraging community appreciation for first responders and their families.
- Fortem ambassador and retired first responder Mark Meredith attended the NSW Police Force Indoor Cricket Championships, an annual event which has a strong wellbeing focus, has commenced hosting coffee catch-up social connection events for NSW Ambulance staff, and hosted a family fun day at Taronga Western Plains Zoo for Thank a First Responder Day.
- Fortem ambassador and active first responder Garry Sims hosted several social connection activities for Fortem, including an inter-agency coffee catch up and photography workshops.



Fortem Australia Board

Members of the Fortem Australia Board generously donate their time to assist in the governance and strategic direction of Fortem Australia and are dedicated to supporting the mental fitness and wellbeing of first responders and their families.

The Fortem Board as at 30 June 2025 comprised:

Graham Ashton AM APM Board Chair

Fortem Australia Former Chief Commissioner, Victoria Police

Graham Ashton AM APM is the Chair of Fortem Australia's Board. Graham has a unique combination of management and leadership skills having served over 40 years in law enforcement, including as Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police from 2015 to 2020 and Deputy Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police.

Graham has been involved in internationally significant counter-terrorism operations including leading the Australian investigation into the 2002 Bali bombings for the joint Australian/Indonesian Taskforce, in Bali. Graham's role as Police Forward Commander of this investigation resulted in him being appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in October 2003. Graham also established the Victoria Police Family Violence Training Centre – an Australian first, to train police officers in providing nuanced responses to family violence incidents and has an international reputation as an advisor on matters of integrity.

In addition to a graduate qualification in management obtained from Queensland University of Technology, Graham has completed numerous leadership programs including attending the prestigious London Business School in 2009. Graham also initiated and led the development of a graduate program in integrity studies as a Visiting Fellow at Wollongong University. Graham is also a Non-Executive Director of 'Male Champions of Change Institute' and a member of the Salvation Army (Victoria) Advisory Board.

Anthony Court, GAICD

Lead Partner, National Security & Justice – KPMG

Anthony is the Lead Partner for the National Security & Justice Sector within KPMG. Anthony has 14 years as a commissioned officer in the Royal Australian Army followed by 25 years as a management consultant across Federal Government, defence and national security agencies.

Anthony commenced his career learning the fundamentals as a project manager in the information technology arena and grew his experience into wider capability development and implementation through to the designing and implementing organisational reform programs.

Anthony has a BSc (Hons) in Physics and a Masters in Military Electronic Systems Engineering. He is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and holds a post graduate in accounting as well as a range of certifications in project, program and portfolio management.

Carol Gobby, GAICD

Vice President of Sales and Growth – Akkodis Australia

Carol is the Vice President of Sales and Growth for Akkodis Australia, part of the Adecco Group and is a senior leader with a career spanning more than 25 years in technology consulting services in global and local organisations.

Carol has significant experience in global complex multi-tiered environments working with clients and partners across sales and business leadership, sales coaching and enablement, digital transformation, customer and employee experience, business and process envisioning, partner management and executive engagement.

Carol brings cross industry experience working closely with public sector, health, manufacturing, logistics, financial, telecommunications and resources. Carol is a change champion, leading and challenging teams to transform traditional models with a laser focus on impact, experiences, continuous improvement, and value creation. She is a supporter of women in IT, STEM and a passionate advocate for responsible business, corporate citizenship, sustainability and diversity, equity and inclusion to make a genuine human and social impact.

Frank Prendergast APM OBE

Consultant

Frank retired from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in 2018 after a career spanning 32 years, the last 15 of which were in senior leadership roles. During his career he served in a diverse range of operational areas, both domestic and international, including the investigation of terrorism, fraud, narcotics, serious organised crime, corruption and special references. He has also been heavily involved in international police capacity development, resource management, corporate governance and administration, policy development, and capability development.

In 2014 Frank was appointed as the Commissioner of the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIPF). Since retirement from the AFP, Frank has worked as a consultant with a number of federal law enforcement agencies and has completed several capability and management reviews.

Brett Lightfoot, GAICD

National Director for Industry – State Director Queensland / Northern Territory Public Sector, Microsoft Australia

As the National Director for Industry – Public Sector, Brett works with a wide range of government agencies, digital platform companies and start-ups in planning and implementing innovative technology solutions that improve the quality and efficiency of citizen digital services. Brett's passion is improving the quality of healthcare, helping save our environment and protecting our citizens through data collaboration, business intelligence and artificial intelligence. Digital transformation brings the opportunity to completely transform how governments deliver services creating new citizen experiences and helping Australia be a world leading digital first country.

Brett is also a Non-Executive Director of StandByU Foundation supporting families who have been affected by early and more severe forms of domestic abuse, giving them the support they need to see a brighter future.

Philippa Byrnes

Head of Marketing, Oceania for Fujitsu

Philippa (Pip) Byrnes is a senior marketing and business leader with over 20 years of experience driving strategic transformation across the technology and services sectors. Currently Head of Marketing, Oceania for Fujitsu, Pip leads initiatives that connect complex technology solutions to real-world outcomes across public sector, defence, healthcare, and enterprise.

Known for her collaborative leadership and strong stakeholder engagement, Pip brings deep expertise in navigating large organisations, managing cross-functional teams, and building partnerships that deliver lasting impact. Her experience in government and high-stakes industries has given her a strong understanding of complex operating environments and the vital role that resilience, trust, and wellbeing play in organisational performance.

Pip is passionate about purpose-led leadership and contributing to organisations that serve the community. She brings a values-driven approach to governance, with a commitment to integrity, inclusion, and measurable social impact – giving her a strong alignment and strategic fit for Fortem’s mission to support the wellbeing of Australia’s first responders and their families.

Former board members

The following representatives resigned from the Fortem Board during the reporting period:

- John Bale
- Libby Jevtovic

**Fortem Australia
Responding with resilience**

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