

Media Release

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St John Ambulance commits to ongoing reform

St John Ambulance WA commits to cultivating an emotionally safe, productive, positive, bullying free organisational culture in response to 27 recommendations made by a review it commissioned into its workforce culture and wellbeing.

The two reports released today, provided by St John's Independent Oversight Panel (IOP) and the Phoenix Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health, complete a trio of reviews. The most recent reports were commissioned by CEO Tony Ahern and the third report was provided by the Chief Psychiatrist in March.

The 27 recommendations provided by the IOP include improving engagement with staff and volunteers in developing health and wellbeing support services, appointing an expert advisory group to inform its support services, building workplace culture, improving support for career transitioning, increased training for operational leaders, and introducing periodic staff surveys to rate organisational culture.

Mr Ahern said he was looking forward to implementing plans to grow his organisation's culture after a long period of self-examination.

"The past 18 months have been about asking questions, examining and listening. We have asked ourselves hard questions that most organisations don't, and I'm proud of us for that," Mr Ahern said.

"I have had some of the toughest conversations of my professional life over the past two years. Mental illness is a uniquely lonely and frightening battle. It tests us as few other of life's challenges do. No-one can work for years as a paramedic or serve in first response without knowing the personal impacts of helping people deal with trauma.

"We asked the panel, and our other reviewers, to help us turn over every rock so that we can continue to improve the health and culture of our workforce. The IOP wants us to do more. And that's okay, because St John WA has a long history of battling to be better."

Mr Ahern said that St John was already well advanced in addressing some of the areas identified by the IOP and is committed to implementing the further recommended improvements.

"We took the view during the reporting and inquiry phase that we needed to strive for continuous improvement and subsequently we have made progress in a number of areas," he said.

These include:

- Commencing a new employee engagement program that includes broad representatives from across the organisation.
- Creating a new Wellbeing and Support services website which all staff, volunteers and their families can access for resources and confidential support.
- Engaging a specialist organisation to deliver a whole-of-organisation education program to improve workplace culture.
- A formal affiliation with the respected private clinic, the Marian Centre, which provides specialist treatment for a range of mental health conditions including PTSD.
- Commencing more detailed screening to ensure suitability for country and community paramedic roles.

Mr Ahern said: “We note also that our people are seeking help more than ever before, not just for issues related to major trauma, but to the everyday stresses that present in the workplace and in our personal lives.”

The number of people accessing support through the St John wellbeing and support system has increased by 600 per cent over the past two years.

Mr Ahern said, following the reviews, he wants to help people with the process of career transitioning; engage with the workforce in the continuing development of wellbeing and support services and increase the training provided to managers on the psychological wellbeing of their teams.

“I am motivated by striving to create the best possible workplace for all of our staff and volunteers, and by serving our community with a world-class ambulance service,” Mr Ahern said.

“There are usually no simple answers to complex issues. But we can achieve extraordinary things by prizing common sense, mutual care, and productive and respectful communication.

“As one of our Beyond Blue colleagues said recently, ‘You can’t create a healthy culture in a climate of adversity’.”

“This is one of my key responsibilities now. We’ve spent a long time prosecuting problems. Often times, the commentary surrounding our culture and wellbeing needs has been counterproductive and adversarial. From here on in, it can’t be.”

The Phoenix and IOP reports and Mr Ahern’s full response to the recommendations can be read here: www.stjohnambulance.com.au/reviews

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Media Contact: Dennis Bertoldo, Media and Public Relations Manager
Ph: (08) 9334 1237 Mob: 0410 341 329