



# Lesson Learnt

## Peer Support Model, Fire & Rescue NSW

### The Issue

Data shows that psychological injuries can cost on average \$50,000-100,000 in comparison to physical injuries costing about \$20,000. From about 2010, Fire & Rescue NSW (FRNSW) experienced an increase in psychological claims.

FRNSW is made up of 7,250 staff of which 6,800 are frontline firefighters. These frontline firefighters are exposed to traumatic incidents as well as the same stressful life events encountered by the general population.

Compounding these stressors is real. Further, those in the role may perceive there to be community expectations that firefighters have 'broader shoulders' than the rest of us: that they are superheroes.

This potent combination of factors are also common to other emergency response workers.

In addition to these factors, firefighters work in a tight-knit, male dominant culture. As a cultural generalisation, it is widely accepted that men in general, but certainly firefighters, are extremely unlikely to reach out for help, even to their close family members or friends.

Firefighters are really good at looking after the equipment on the truck but sometimes they forget to look after themselves

*Mark Dobson, Wellness Coordinator and Firefighter, Fire & Rescue NSW [see [Video](#)]*

### Taking the Initiative

To help deal with the risk of psychological injury impacting their staff, FRNSW have endeavoured to shift the focus on mental wellness from a reactive to a proactive model. Instead of only providing support during critical incidents, programs have been developed which attempt to:

- Improve mental health literacy for all staff
- Reduce the stigma attached to asking for help
- Build resilience amongst their workforce.

The Peer Support Officer (PSO) Program is one of the more successful and popular initiatives.

In the 1990s, FRNSW established a peer-based support network of volunteer firefighters who are deployed in response to critical incidents. When a shift to proactive wellness was initiated, the scope of this support network was broadened.

Now, the PSO Program engages 65 volunteers who act as mental health champions within their own local area commands as well as providing responsive critical incident support.

Through staff surveys and anecdotal evidence, the PSO program is showing results. Due to the popularity and evidence demonstrating results, the FRNSW will expand this program to approximately 80 volunteer PSOs in 2015. A recent response to an expression of interest to staff received over 50 responses.

This brief was prepared by Big Picture Communications based on presented material from Natalie Mitchell, Senior Project Officer, Fire & Rescue NSW at the Suncorp Risk Services Sharing Day 2015. Other contributors include Michael Taylor Acting Assistant Director, WHS and Mark Dobson, Wellbeing Coordinator. For more information, please contact Natalie or Mark via [health&safety@fire.nsw.gov.au](mailto:health&safety@fire.nsw.gov.au).