



**FORTEM**  
AUSTRALIA

*Supporting* **THE BRAVE**

# Fortem Australia

Submission

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper

ABN 586 315 878 92  
Fortem Australia Limited

## Contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	3
<b>Recommendations for the Commonwealth</b> .....	6
Investing in the national resilience of first responders .....	6
Alleviating key pressure points and challenges in concurrent crises .....	7
Mitigating ADF overreliance through first responder resilience and support.....	8
Mobilising community volunteers to support first responder resilience in times of disaster ..	9
<b>About Fortem Australia</b> .....	11
<b>Fortem Australia’s service delivery</b> .....	12
<b>Strong partnerships for resilient communities</b> .....	14
<b>Why has Fortem Australia chosen its suite of services?</b> .....	18
<b>What sets Fortem Australia apart from other providers?</b> .....	19
<b>Strong alignment to the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework</b> .....	21
<b>The need for independent community level support services</b> .....	22
<b>Contact Fortem Australia</b> .....	23
<b>Reference list</b> .....	24

## Executive summary

Australia is currently bracing for what promises to be a challenging fire season. Although it's unlikely to match the sheer ferocity of the devastating 2019-2020 Black Summer fires, the country is facing above-average temperatures, reduced rainfall, and significant fuel loads that have made much of the landscape vulnerable to bushfires.

Across the nation, extensive efforts are in motion to mitigate the threat to communities at risk. These include reducing fire fuel loads, strategically positioning improved firefighting equipment, and rigorous training for volunteer fire crews, who consistently dedicate themselves to this demanding work. However, amidst all these preparations, one critical question looms: What are we doing to safeguard the physical and emotional wellbeing of the courageous individuals whose duty it is to confront these fires head-on?

Australia's 370,000 first responders are the brave individuals standing on the frontlines to preserve lives and protect property in disaster-affected communities nationwide. Their unwavering dedication is a testament to their commitment, but it comes at a significant personal cost. The work they undertake is not only vital but also deeply confronting, traumatic, and dangerous. Often, the demands of being the first to respond to others mean that they are the last to attend to their own wellbeing and that of their families. This sacrifice remains unspoken but undeniably profound.

As a result of their indispensable role in the community, first responders grapple with alarming rates of psychological distress, diagnosed mental health conditions, and suicidal thoughts. These rates surpass those of the general adult population and workers in other high-risk professions, such as the Australian Defence Force (Lawrence et al. 2018; Kyron et al. 2021).

Research consistently underscores the high levels of exhaustion and burnout among first responders when chronic workplace stress is left unaddressed. Reports indicate that up to 65% of first responders experience some degree of burnout (Drew & Martin 2022; Cole et al. 2018). Moreover, exposure to traumatised individuals in the community, coupled with direct trauma exposure, leads to vicarious trauma, contributing to compassion fatigue in up to 20% of first responders—a precursor to burnout if left unattended (Brady 2017; Burnett et al. 2020).

With an ever-changing climate, the risk of future climate extremes and increasingly severe disasters is on the rise. In the face of these climate-induced catastrophes, we rely heavily on our first responders to continue answering the call to protect and care for our communities.

A groundbreaking Australian study conducted after the harrowing 2019-2020 Australian Black Summer fire season underscored the profound impact of disaster response work. Shockingly, 5,000 firefighting personnel who responded to those fires displayed a high need for mental health support due to the traumatic, life-threatening events they endured—more than double the expected rate. Tragically, only one in five of these individuals reported receiving adequate mental health and wellbeing support from their first responder agencies (Lawrence et al. 2021).

Notably, this study revealed that the demands of disaster response work can be just as damaging to mental health as trauma exposure. First responders often work tirelessly for as long as they are needed during critical response periods, facing intense work demands like extended hours and limited recovery opportunities between challenging shifts. This overburdening puts them at considerable risk of burnout and associated mental health issues (Lawrence et al. 2021).

Adding to the complexity, many first responders and their families live and work in regional and rural areas of Australia that are continually affected by disasters. Both paid and volunteer first responders face additional mental health challenges due to geographical isolation and limited access to social connections and clinical support (Lawrence et al. 2018; Beyond Blue 2020).

These first responders living in disaster-prone regions are not immune to the impacts of disasters. They may experience property loss, displacement, disruptions to essential services, and exposure to traumatic events. Additionally, their personal connections to those affected can deepen the trauma they experience, further compromising their mental wellbeing (Beyond Blue 2020). Moreover, first responders from across the country are often summoned to deploy to disaster-affected areas to provide vital resources, impacting resourcing, morale, and overall wellbeing of first responder agencies.

A recent inquiry in Queensland highlighted that rolling tropical cyclones, storms, and flooding mean that many communities have no mental health reprieve between natural disasters. Climate change is expected to worsen the frequency and severity of future disasters, leading to cascading, compounding, and concurrent disaster events (Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management 2022).

Given these factors, first responders will continue to experience detrimental mental health impacts as a direct result of their ongoing disaster response work. Urgent and well-funded support is needed to build their resilience and minimise the mental health impacts of future incidents.

Now, more than ever, we must prioritise retaining our first responders' capabilities. This requires a shift toward enhancing human resilience before disaster strikes. Supporting the front line before disasters occur must become a central focus. We need to equip our first responders, particularly our firefighters in the upcoming summer period, with the necessary tools to respond effectively. This includes preventative support, social connection, early intervention, independent career support, and organisational cultural change programs.

While some advocate for creating new capabilities including a new volunteer workforce to support natural disasters, investing in enhancing the human capability that already exists and building upon proven state agencies can address potential cost and timing issues associated with establishing new agencies.

The urgency to strengthen our human capability for this summer is undeniable, as we witness severe wildfires in Canada, Europe, and Hawaii. While support after disasters is crucial, we must do more to prepare and support the first responder community and their agencies for natural disasters.

The Commonwealth Government has allocated substantial funding for projects aimed at reducing disaster risk and improving preparedness for various natural disasters. However, it is equally vital to allocate comparable funding to enhance the resilience and capacity of first responders directly responsible for protecting and supporting communities during disasters. This funding should be substantial enough to support their day-to-day operations and enable them to effectively handle the additional pressures of disaster response.

In our relentless focus on the equipment needed to combat fires, we often overlook the humans who operate this equipment and apply their training and talents to safeguard our communities. Building the capacity of first responders to continue responding must become a national priority.

Australian communities heavily rely on first responders to protect lives and property during disasters. Simultaneously, there is also significant dependence on the Australian Defence Force to deploy to disaster-affected regions, often at the expense of alternative, sustainable solutions centred on existing organisations (Bennett 2022). However, this reliance is unsustainable and hampers the ADF's capacity to fulfill its core national defence responsibilities (Australian Government Department of Defence 2023).

Preserving and enhancing the existing workforce of first responders is a more efficient resource allocation strategy, expected to reduce overreliance on the ADF for domestic disaster response. This ensures that the ADF can concentrate its efforts on strategic defence operations, safeguarding long-term national security, and maintaining readiness to respond to international threats. To address this challenge, it is imperative to prioritise the resilience of first responders. Investing in their wellbeing and resilience empowers them to confront and work through deeply personal challenges that arise during disaster response and recovery efforts.

Investing in the resilience of first responders will ensure that these individuals can fulfill their crucial roles with unwavering dedication—safeguarding lives, property, and the resolve of Australian communities. Combined with initiatives like increased investment in regional infrastructure, these efforts will assist the ADF in focusing more on national security priorities while reducing the emphasis on domestic disaster response.

Investing in the resilience of first responders will ultimately strengthen the nation's capacity to respond to and recover from interconnected and escalating disaster events. Prioritising the wellbeing of first responders and enhancing their resilience is a matter of utmost national importance and critical to the overall success of disaster response and recovery efforts.

Fortem Australia is the nation's leading independent non-profit organisation that builds the capability of first responders and their agencies to continue to protect and care for Australian communities through preventative and early intervention mental health programs.

## **Recommendations for the Commonwealth**

### Investing in the national resilience of first responders

The mental health impact of supporting disaster affected communities often has a long tail, with many first responders experiencing significant psychological distress months or years after responding to a disaster event. Due to this burden and the long tail impact, there is an urgent need to establish a nationally coordinated and consistent approach to supporting the mental health readiness, response and recovery of first responders working in disaster-prone regions.

Fortem Australia recognises that State and Territory Governments have jurisdiction over most first responder agencies. However, there is clear and critical role for the Commonwealth to play in providing strong leadership, investment and national guidance. This is particularly crucial when it comes to ensuring the wellbeing and effectiveness of first responders and their families who are at the forefront of disaster response.

To address the challenges posed by an ever-changing climate, the Commonwealth must adopt a forward-looking approach. This involves the development of longer-term capacities and capabilities for first responders that extend beyond immediate crisis management. It is essential to recognise that the psychological toll of disaster response can be substantial, impacting the mental health and resilience of these dedicated individuals in the months and years that follow.

Prioritising resilience support should be an ongoing commitment, with a dual focus on immediate and long-term needs. Immediate support may involve providing timely access to mental health services to address the acute challenges faced by first responders. However, the Commonwealth must not stop there; it should also invest in long-term resilience-building initiatives.

Investment in resilience programs should have a strong foundation in prevention and early intervention. Instead of solely addressing issues as they arise, the Commonwealth should place greater emphasis on preventing and mitigating potential challenges. This proactive approach involves implementing social connection programs, wellbeing services, mental health initiatives and training programs that equip first responders with the tools to cope with stress, trauma, and burnout before they reach a crisis point.

By prioritising prevention and early intervention, the Commonwealth can ensure that first responders are better prepared to handle the rigors of their roles and the added pressure of cascading and concurrent disasters.

It also underscores the commitment to the ongoing wellbeing of these individuals, acknowledging that their resilience is crucial not only for their own sake but also for the communities they serve.

Furthermore, the investment in first responder resilience should be substantial enough to provide consistent support for their day-to-day operations. This means ensuring that they have access to the necessary services required to perform their duties effectively. Additionally, this support should extend to addressing the unique challenges faced by first responders in disaster-prone regions, including geographical isolation and limited access to clinical support.

The Commonwealth has a vital role to play in ensuring that first responders are not only adequately supported but also equipped with the resilience and capabilities needed to confront the challenges posed by a changing climate and an increasing frequency of disasters. This requires a comprehensive, proactive, and ongoing approach that prioritises prevention, early intervention, and long-term wellbeing.

Fortem Australia acknowledges the long-term nature of recovery and the need for sustained efforts to build resilience in first responder families affected by cascading disasters. Therefore, we resolutely advocate the significance of substantial and sustained funding to address the persistent need for specialised mental health support, which may arise months or even years following a disaster.

#### Alleviating key pressure points and challenges in concurrent crises

At a national level, competing and concurrent crises can strain the mental health, resilience, and career retention of first responders. Key pressure points include the risk of burnout and mental health issues due to chronic workplace stress, extended hours, and limited recovery opportunities. These challenges can be exacerbated when multiple crises occur simultaneously. If not addressed, these key pressure points will jeopardise the strength and effectiveness of our nation's disaster management workforce.

To effectively address these concerns, it is imperative for the Commonwealth to commit substantial and sustained funding aimed at augmenting the resilience and capabilities of first responders. This financial support must not only be adequate to bolster their day-to-day activities but also to equip them with the resources necessary to navigate the heightened demands of disaster response.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for the Commonwealth to facilitate cohesion within a fragmented sector. This can be accomplished by endorsing initiatives that foster robust partnerships among several independent community-based organisations. This approach will unite the many organisations working in this space under a common banner dedicated to enhancing the resilience and career longevity of our first responders on a national scale.



Taking proactive measures to address the mental health and fortitude of our first responders is of paramount national importance. By adopting this approach, the Commonwealth can better prepare these dedicated individuals to effectively manage concurrent crises.

Consequently, this proactive strategy not only safeguards the existing workforce of first responders but also offers the prospect of reducing the unsustainable strain placed on the Australian Defence Force for domestic disaster response. Such a shift in focus enables the ADF to concentrate its resources and expertise on strategic defence operations, upholding our long-term national security and readiness to respond to international threats. To confront this challenge effectively, prioritising the resilience of our first responders stands as an imperative for the Commonwealth.

#### Mitigating ADF overreliance through first responder resilience and support

When disasters strike, Australia looks to its first responders to safeguard lives and property. Simultaneously, there is also a growing dependence on members of the ADF to deploy to disaster affected regions. However, this dependence on the Australian Defence Force for disaster response has become unsustainable. Climate change projections indicate an increase in the frequency and severity of such events, necessitating a shift in disaster response strategy (Bennett 2022).

The recent Defence Strategic Review emphasises this issue, highlighting how ADF involvement in domestic disasters hampers its core responsibilities, readiness, and combat effectiveness (Australian Government Department of Defence 2023). Therefore, it's essential for the Commonwealth to work closely with state and local governments as well as not-for-profit organisations to establish comprehensive national resilience and response strategies tailored to the challenges posed by climate change.

Furthermore, the Defence Strategic Review underscores that the ADF is ill-suited and under-equipped to serve as a domestic disaster recovery agency alongside its primary function (Australian Government Department of Defence 2023). Reducing dependence on the ADF for domestic disaster response allows for more efficient allocation of resources. This enables the ADF to focus on its core mission—protecting the nation's long-term security and maintaining preparedness for international threats.

To meet this challenge, prioritising the resilience of first responders is imperative. Investing in their wellbeing and resilience empowers them to confront the personal challenges that arise during disaster response and recovery. Although first responder workforces are primarily a state and territory responsibility, there are common themes at the national level regarding workforce wellbeing and community resilience. Therefore, the Commonwealth must provide leadership in supporting first responders and their families, ensuring they can perform at their best while maintaining mental health.



Investing in first responder wellbeing and resilience is a national priority and essential for the success of disaster response and recovery efforts. It also reduces the burden on the ADF, allowing it to fulfill its primary role in safeguarding Australia's national security interests.

Failure to invest in mental health support for first responders and their families results in significant personal and financial costs. These costs encompass reduced workforce engagement and morale, decreased productivity, higher turnover rates, increased healthcare expenses, and greater costs related to insurance and workers' compensation practices.

Insufficient investment in first responder mental health also solidifies an unsustainable reliance on the ADF for repeated deployments in the face of escalating domestic disasters. The Commonwealth's commitment to bolstering first responder resilience is pivotal to addressing these challenges effectively.

#### Mobilising community volunteers to support first responder resilience in times of disaster

Community members rely heavily on first responders to protect and care for them during periods of disaster. This often instils a strong desire within community members to give back to these selfless individuals who serve their regions tirelessly. In light of this, Fortem Australia strongly advocates for the Commonwealth Government's investment in harnessing the potential of volunteer community members to bolster the resilience of first responders nationwide.

Fortem Australia has forged a strong partnership with R U OK?, StandBy Support After Suicide, LivingWorks Australia, and the University of Canberra. This partnership aims to implement a comprehensive end-to-end resilience framework, primarily focusing on supporting first responders in disaster-prone regions across the country.

The joint effort by Fortem Australia and its partner organisations seeks to harness the willingness of volunteer community members to support first responders. In doing so, the partnership will deliver a scalable model and expert guidance on facilitating evidence-informed social connection activities to disaster-prone communities on a national scale.

This model places a strong emphasis on mobilising a volunteer workforce of community members from disaster-prone regions. These volunteers will be dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their families. The partnership will actively engage with communities, offering opportunities for volunteers to champion the mental health and well-being of first responders through various social connection and well-being initiatives.

All initiatives will operate within a well-defined framework, incorporating sound clinical governance and risk mitigation measures. The partnership's expertise will encompass:

- Community consultation
- Volunteer recruitment and training

- Mental health literacy education
- Development of social connection and wellbeing programs
- Collaboration with local mental health professionals
- Fostering peer support networks
- Ensuring supervision and care for volunteers
- Establishing a robust system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of social connection and well-being supports provided by volunteer community members.

In proposing this model, Fortem Australia and its partners draw inspiration from the Two-Way Social Support model. This model emphasises the mutual benefits of giving and receiving social support, fostering social cohesion, trust, and cooperation within communities. By empowering volunteer community members to provide evidence-informed support to first responders, this approach is expected to enhance social cohesion, wellbeing, and community resilience (Shakespeare-Finch & Obst 2011; Lawrence et al. 2018; Beyond Blue 2020).

First responders will experience increased connectedness to their communities, leading to improved mental health and well-being outcomes. Simultaneously, volunteer community members will find purpose, fulfillment, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, this approach aligns with Australia's disaster recovery principles of community-led recovery, acknowledging the resilience and leadership within communities (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2017).

Nonetheless, there is an exceptional opportunity to further strengthen and fortify communities by embedding evidence-informed social connection and mental health support services across regional areas and disaster-affected regions. In implementing this approach, the partnership will create meaningful opportunities for community members to forge relationships with first responders and become advocates for those who serve their communities.

Furthermore, Fortem Australia and its partner organisations aspire to engage retired and former first responders residing in these regions. This segment of the population often harbours a strong desire to volunteer and support current serving members and their families. Mobilising this resource will offer profound benefits to disaster-prone communities.

By equipping volunteers with the necessary expertise and resources to support first responders and their families, this approach aims to enhance the mental health literacy of community members. This, in turn, is expected to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviours within disaster-prone and affected communities.

This proposed approach offers numerous positive outcomes, including increased resilience, sustainable community ownership, and capacity-building. It ensures that community members are empowered to care for those who protect and serve their local regions, fostering a stronger and more resilient society. Fortem Australia strongly urges the Commonwealth Government to invest in and endorse this pivotal community volunteer initiative.

## About Fortem Australia

Fortem Australia is the nation's leading not-for-profit organisation supporting the resilience of first responders and their families - the people who protect and care for Australian communities.

Since 2019, Fortem Australia has delivered evidence-informed wellbeing and mental health care that is independent yet adjunctive to workplace programs. The focus is on building resilience and early intervention. Operating outside the workers compensation system, Fortem Australia offers a truly holistic approach to psychological wellbeing.

Our evidence-informed programs have been developed in line with extensive research and in conjunction with senior leaders from state based first responder agencies, national law enforcement agencies and representative agencies from Australia's National Intelligence Community. This reduces duplication and ensures that Fortem compliments existing internal service offerings.

Senior leaders represent their first responder agency on Fortem Australia's Advisory Board. Advisory Board members provide strategic advice and support to Fortem Australia. This ensures that we are well-prepared to seize sector-wide opportunities and prioritise the mental health, wellbeing, and career management of all first responders and their families nationwide.

Additionally, Advisory Board members collaborate to address challenges related to mental health, wellbeing, and retention in their respective workforces. This fosters a community of practice, promoting Fortem's services as an external option of choice. The Fortem Australia Advisory Board is Chaired by Michael Willing APM, the Managing Director for National Security and Safety and Client Account Lead at Accenture Australia. Michael brings over 31 years of distinguished service as a former Deputy Police Commissioner in the New South Wales Police Force.

Fortem Australia runs wellbeing activities designed to build both skills and social networks that stand first responders in good stead in times of increased stress. Utilising an evidence-informed framework, Fortem Australia provides a suite of in-person and virtual wellbeing and social connection activities to enhance resilience — not only in individual first responders, but in family units.

Fortem also provides evidence-based psychology support to first responders and their families and provides career management services for those looking to refresh their commitment to service or transition out of service. These programs complement the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry into the mental health conditions experienced by first responders and are strongly aligned to the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Fortem Australia also spearheads a National Day of Action each year in June – Thank a First Responder Day. This initiative acknowledges the work of first responders and links them to expressions of gratitude felt by the community.

In 2023, Thank a First Responder Day reached over 47 million social impressions, which is a compelling show of support for our first responder community.

Fortem Australia currently offers on-the-ground services in several communities across South East Queensland, Townsville, Melbourne, Gippsland, South East NSW, Canberra, Illawarra, Shoalhaven, Sydney, Newcastle, NSW Mid North Coast, Northern NSW, Darwin, and Perth. Our virtual activities and wellbeing resources are available to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

With additional support and funding, Fortem Australia proposes to swiftly deploy to additional disaster-affected communities. This deployment will involve providing specialised expertise and direct supports to first responders and community members in these regions. Through this approach, the alliance will substantially expand its geographical reach and maximise impact, significantly bolstering the resilience of communities nationwide.

As we approach four years of operation, Fortem Australia has supported over 14,000 unique first responders and their families, received 35,000 wellbeing activity registrations, received over 2,500 career management referrals, and provided 5,600 psychology sessions to first responders and their families across the country. Fortem has built a scale that is unmatched by any other provider in Australia.

## **Fortem Australia's service delivery**

### Wellbeing activities

Utilising an evidence-informed framework, Fortem Australia provides a suite of in-person and virtual wellbeing and social connection activities to enhance resilience — not only in individual emergency service workers, but in family units.

From cooking lessons to yoga, stand up paddle-boarding or something as simple as a coffee catch-up, wellbeing activities provide opportunities to build and strengthen connections within and between families, agencies and work teams. Fortem Australia's wellbeing activities build networks of safety and support - a key protective factor for suicide.

Through these activities, Fortem Australia supports first responders and their families who may otherwise be unaware of the need for, or indeed actively avoid attempts to address mental health concerns.

These preventative health and wellbeing activities pave for early detection and early intervention for mental ill-health. Fortem Australia's wellbeing activities also serve as a 'soft entry' into clinical services, whereby first responders and their families can receive ongoing evidence-based therapies (Hilbrink 2022).

### Clinical services

Fortem provides mental health care that is independent yet adjunctive to workplace programs. Fortem Australia provides self-directed mental fitness tools, mental health literacy resources, online/in-person care coordination and psychology services to first responders and their families nationwide.

Operating outside the workers' compensation — a system which four out of five first responders perceive to be detrimental to recovery from psychological injury — Fortem's specialist psychologists provide care that is first responder-culture informed, confidential, accessible, and inclusive of family.

Fortem's clinical team are highly experienced in addressing the challenges and traumas that first responders and their families go through. We believe that it is impossible to separate the impact of stressors in the workplace and in the home; that the health of the whole family unit has a strong bearing on health outcomes for first responders. Therefore, our services are open to families and one in four psychology sessions are provided directly to family members.

Fortem Australia's clinical service has shown significant positive outcomes, as evidenced by data on clinical presentations and treatment results. While some cases have been more severe and chronic, the overall picture indicates a substantial improvement through early intervention and restorative health interventions for psychological disorder and lifestyle factors causing distress. Individuals seeking our services initially exhibit compromised wellbeing, but after successful treatment with our skilled clinicians, they largely leave our clinical service with their wellbeing restored.

The impact of our clinical service extends beyond individual mental health and wellbeing. It plays a direct role in strengthening first responder families, reducing trauma-related stress injuries, and mitigating the risk of suicide within this population. Our experienced and culturally sensitive clinicians deliver evidence-based therapies to individuals, families, and couples, and we employ a range of validated tools to measure treatment outcomes.

Notably, in addition to positive outcomes with psychological disorder, our treatment has shown significant improvements in key domains of wellbeing such as 'sense of achievement,' 'future security,' and 'relationships.' The enhancement of relationships aligns with Fortem's core approach of fostering social connectedness and being family-focused as a means of supporting wellbeing and resilience in the first responder sector.

### Career Management Program

Fortem Australia delivers an effective Career Management Program, supporting first responders and their families throughout their career lifecycle and beyond. Provided by an expert team with lived experience in first responder agencies, our program is purpose built to either sustain and refresh a first responder's commitment to service or successfully assist their transition.

Approximately 20% of all first responders who enter Fortem Australia's Career Management Service with views to exit from their agency, actually decided to stay within service. This is a compelling finding: that exploring, resourcing and reframing the experience of first responders contemplating resignation undertaken with an experienced case manager, supported their retention, and reaffirmed their commitment to first responder employment. It is the aim of Fortem to extend career management programming to further support the career maintenance needs of First responders, ultimately enriching and securing the viability of remaining in service.

In addition to retention, this program provides culturally safe and well-considered transition services to those looking for new life and new career opportunities following their contribution in service. It is vital that there is an independent and external organisation providing this support to first responders and their families. Fortem Australia's transition services are tailored to the unique needs of the first responder and promote a whole person- holistic approach to career transition & lifestyle planning.

### Community Engagement

At a community level, Fortem Australia utilises a multi-modal approach to mental health literacy and stigma reduction engagement. We connect senior leaders of first responder agencies across the country and facilitate opportunities to share ideas and resources.

We engage with our participants and relevant stakeholders to facilitate access and ease referrals to other relevant services. This ensures participants are informed and supported through the referral process to Fortem's internal services; especially where there is poor mental health literacy and/or hesitancy around help-seeking.

Additionally, Fortem Australia creates and distributes mental health resources tailored specifically for the emergency services family. These resources prioritise relevant content presented in accessible language. By providing these mental health literacy materials, Fortem aims to raise awareness, promote understanding, and decrease self-stigma. Ultimately, these resources serve as a foundation for fostering improved help-seeking behaviours in the future.

### **Strong partnerships for resilient communities**

Fortem Australia has forged a strong partnership with the esteemed organisations of R U OK?, StandBy Support After Suicide, LivingWorks Australia, and the University of Canberra. Together, we are determined to provide comprehensive, face-to-face programs and resources that bolster the resilience of first responders in disasters affected communities across Australia.



The primary goals of the partnership are to reduce suicide risk, elevate overall wellbeing, and strengthen the retention of first responders. By delivering partnership services, communities across Australia will have a strengthened capability in their first responders, ensuring they remain on the frontline in disaster affected communities, performing at their highest potential.

On-the-ground supports will be delivered within Fortem Australia's current operational areas, supporting communities impacted by disasters in South East Queensland, Townsville, Melbourne, Gippsland, South East NSW, Canberra, Illawarra, Shoalhaven, Sydney, Newcastle, NSW Mid North Coast, Northern NSW, Darwin, and Perth. In addition, supplementary virtual supports will be delivered to extend the reach where there is not a physical presence.

Moreover, a scalable model will be implemented to enable partnership personnel to swiftly deploy to additional disaster-prone and affected communities. This deployment will involve providing specialised expertise and direct supports to first responders in these regions. Through this approach, the partnership will substantially expand its geographical reach and maximise impact, significantly bolstering the resilience of communities nationwide.

#### Partnership organisations

##### R U OK?

R U OK? is a public health promotion charity that encourages people to stay connected and have conversations that can help others through difficult times in their lives. One of R U OK?'s notable initiatives is the 'Are they Triple OK?' campaign, designed specifically for first responders. This campaign seeks to enhance the social support of first responders, encouraging early intervention and promoting help-seeking on a national level.

Furthermore, R U OK? boasts a network of community ambassador volunteers from various regions across Australia who have a lived experience of mental ill health or suicide. These ambassadors openly share their stories and their dedication to fostering regular and meaningful conversations. Their ultimate goal is to create a connected world where everyone feels protected against suicide.

As an esteemed partnership member, R U OK? is dedicated to delivering resources from the 'Are They Triple OK?' campaign and mobilising community ambassadors to provide support in disaster-affected regions.

##### StandBy Support After Suicide

StandBy Support After Suicide is the leading postvention program in Australia that focuses on assisting individuals and communities affected by suicide. For over two decades, StandBy has provided support to families, first responders, and communities affected by suicide.



Through partnerships with organisations, local communities, and reputable service providers, StandBy delivers postvention services for suicide bereavement across Australia.

According to the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework, first responders are a group that require additional support due to their exposure to multiple traumatic disaster events over time. They also face a significantly higher risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviours compared to the general Australian population.

As a member of the partnership initiative, StandBy is committed to providing bereavement support and postvention workshops to first responders and their families affected by suicide in regions impacted by disasters. This strategic partnership ensures that StandBy can fulfill its mission and offer valuable assistance to those in need.

### LivingWorks Australia

LivingWorks Australia is dedicated to the critical mission of preventing and intervening in suicide. Their primary objective is to provide individuals and communities with the essential knowledge, skills, and resources needed to identify and assist people who may be vulnerable to suicide.

Through a variety of programs and training initiatives, LivingWorks Australia empowers participants to effectively identify warning signs, engage in compassionate conversations, and facilitate connections with appropriate professional support for individuals in distress. By cultivating a network of trained individuals, their overarching goal is to foster a supportive environment where people are equipped to respond adeptly to suicidal thoughts and behaviours, ultimately making a difference in saving lives and promoting mental wellbeing.

LivingWorks Australia provides a range of suicide intervention programs, consisting of a 90-minute online resource, a half-day training program, and a two-day workshop. These programs equip participants with the necessary skills to conduct life-saving interventions for individuals who are at risk of suicide. As a respected partner of the Initiative, LivingWorks Australia is dedicated to delivering these suicide intervention programs to disaster-prone communities across the country.

The programs offered by LivingWorks Australia are open to individuals aged 13 years and above, creating opportunities to strengthen the resilience of first responder families. These programs cater to the needs of individual workers, partners, parents, and teenage children, allowing capacity-building at various levels within the family unit.

### University of Canberra

Professor Richard Keegan PhD, a distinguished academic, High-Performance Sports Fellow and Registered Psychologist, leads the University of Canberra's involvement in this strategic partnership. With extensive expertise in enhancing resilience among high-performance and

high-risk workforces, Professor Keegan, and his colleagues from the psychology department and the 'Occupational Performance' research group bring valuable knowledge to the table.

Under Professor Keegan's guidance, the University of Canberra has spearheaded resilience and optimisation initiatives with organisations such as the Australian Institute of Sport and the ADF. Furthermore, the university has conducted comprehensive evaluations of mental health, physical health, and operational readiness programs within the ADF.

As a key research partner in this strategic partnership, the University of Canberra will collaborate on designing cutting-edge resilience support systems for first responders and their families. Their contributions will encompass training, development of support programs, and research to assess the effectiveness and optimisation of existing services. Additionally, the university will assist in standardising and providing consistent service delivery, upholding leading and best practices to enhance community resilience in regions affected by disasters.

Together, this pioneering partnership initiative is steadfast in delivering personalised care that is effective, timely, meticulously coordinated and rooted in evidence. This will enhance the resilience of first responders and boost the capability of communities responding to and recovering from disaster.

#### End-to-end partnership model

The partnership of organisations will deliver an end-to-end model of support for first responders, their families and communities more broadly. This model focuses on mental ill-health prevention, early intervention, suicide prevention, stepped care for mental health and suicide bereavement support to ensure the holistic wellbeing and strengthened resilience of first responders and therefore disaster-prone regions.

- **Prevention:** the partnership will deliver proactive measures to promote mental wellbeing and prevent the onset of mental health issues. This includes awareness campaigns, educational programs, and community initiatives that foster resilience, build networks of safety and support, enhance mental health literacy, and promote self-care practices. Fortem Australia will drive this preventative approach.
- **Early intervention:** services and supports delivered by the partnership will incorporate accessible and timely mental health screening, assessments, and low intensity clinical interventions of first responders and their families working and living in disaster prone communities. By identifying early warning signs and providing appropriate support, first responders can receive timely assistance and prevent further deterioration. Fortem Australia will lead early intervention supports delivered through the partnership model.
- **Suicide prevention:** suicide prevention forms a significant component of this model. Partner organisations will deliver training and workshops that equip individuals with the

necessary skills to conduct life-saving interventions. Additionally, partner organisations will support the creation of creating safety plans for disaster prone regions, with a focus on establishing a supportive environment that promotes help-seeking behaviours.

- Stepped care model for mental health: for individuals requiring more intensive mental health support, Fortem Australia will deliver a stepped care model. This graded support includes care coordination and psychology services to first responders and their families nationwide. Additionally, partner organisations will collaborate with regional healthcare professionals, providing comprehensive and coordinated support tailored to individual and community needs of disaster-prone areas. Fortem Australia's psychology support will be provided to first responders and their families.
- Suicide bereavement support: recognising the profound impact of suicide on individuals and communities, the partnership will provide dedicated support for those bereaved by suicide. This includes bereavement support, workshops and resources to help individuals navigate the complex emotions and challenges associated with grief and loss in the context of suicide.

This cohesive approach will foster resilience, reduce suicide rates, and extend support to those impacted by suicide. Consequently, the resilience of disaster-prone regions nationwide will be fortified as first responders engage in wellbeing and job-ready preparedness, maintain their wellbeing while working on the frontlines, safeguarding lives and property during the response and recovery phases of disasters and minimise the ill-effects of burnout and cumulative trauma exposure in disaster.

### **Why has Fortem Australia chosen its suite of services?**

Fortem Australia stands out in the field of first responder wellbeing by employing a whole of community approach to building resilience. There are several limitations to focusing solely on individual resilience strategies. In isolation, individual resilience strategies are insufficient to maintain the wellbeing of first responders, aid in their recovery from high stress events and prepare communities for natural disasters. With this understanding, Fortem has developed a suite of services designed to address these challenges comprehensively.

One of the key areas Fortem focuses on is enhancing mental health literacy and decreasing stigma. Poor mental health literacy and self-stigma often act as barriers to effective and timely help-seeking. By tackling these issues head-on, Fortem Australia facilitates early intervention help-seeking behaviours, leading to improved health outcomes that are also cost-effective.

Fortem's approach to community resilience encompasses multiple facets, including initiatives such as 'Thank a First Responder Day,' which encourages the general community to express their gratitude towards first responders during a national day of action.

This platform allows first responders to reconnect with the meaning and purpose of their work, experience support, and reduce self-stigma.

Additionally, Fortem provides mental health and wellbeing resources specifically tailored to first responders, employing evidence-based content presented in accessible language. Taking services directly to the first responder community, Fortem's Community Engagement Coordinators actively engage with local communities, fostering interagency connections and participating in research and advocacy to contribute to national policy and strategy conversations.

The Wellbeing Activities Program implemented by Fortem aims to build resilience among first responders by engaging individuals and their social networks in proactive health practices. These activities are designed to be low-threat and low-stigma, free, varied, and easily accessible. By providing a 'no strings attached' opportunity for first responders to participate, Fortem creates a foundation of trust, ensuring that they know where to turn for information or stepped-up care when needed. The program also focuses on developing skills and building social networks that can provide support during times of stress.

Recognising that even the most resilient individuals are not immune to mental health issues, Fortem offers comprehensive psychology and counselling services. Taking a whole-of-family approach and emphasising early intervention, these services provide an independent option outside the injury management system. Fortem ensures that staff are appropriately qualified, experienced, and trained to understand first responder culture and concerns, delivering a personalised approach that includes intake, triage, and waitlist support.

Fortem's Career Management Program plays a vital role in maintaining a healthy workforce by providing proactive career development and supported transitions for those exiting service. This holistic and participant-led program assigns case managers with lived experience and training in first responder culture and concerns. By assisting first responders in staying happy, healthy, and productive in service, and supporting their transition with dignity and respect, Fortem values their experience and skills while harnessing their future potential.

### **What sets Fortem Australia apart from other providers?**

Fortem Australia stands out as the leading national entity providing prevention and early intervention resilience services to first responders and their families due to several key factors.

Fortem Australia operates independently from agency and injury management systems, allowing the provision of unbiased support and services. This independence ensures that the support offered is driven solely by the wellbeing of first responders, free from external influences.

While support is independent, comprehensive efforts are taken with agency leaders to ensure that Fortem's support complements existing internal wellbeing mechanisms.

Fortem Australia has a foundational focus on prevention and early intervention. Rather than solely addressing issues after they arise, Fortem places great emphasis on preventing and mitigating potential challenges. By prioritising prevention, Fortem establishes a proactive approach to wellbeing that can better support first responders and their families before they reach crisis point.

Fortem Australia also builds individual and collective awareness, enhancing capabilities, and improving access to timely and appropriate support services for first responders and their families. By empowering individuals and their support networks, Fortem creates resilient communities that can effectively address the unique challenges faced by first responders.

Recognising the significance of social connections and overall wellbeing, Fortem places great importance on social determinants of wellbeing and incorporates suicide prevention elements into service design and delivery. By focusing on these cornerstones, Fortem strengthens the social fabric and enhances the overall wellbeing of first responders and their families.

Furthermore, Fortem adopts a whole-of-community approach, understanding that the wellbeing of first responders extends beyond individual efforts. By bridging the gap between research and the specific needs of first responders, Fortem ensures that its services remain relevant, effective, and impactful.

Fortem Australia has established a substantial geographic footprint in disaster-affected communities throughout the country, providing in-person services on the ground where they are most needed. This extensive reach and presence allow Fortem to offer support to more first responders, enhancing their resilience and optimising the capabilities of personnel on the frontline in disaster-affected communities.

Moreover, Fortem combines the wealth of knowledge, passion, and authenticity derived from lived experiences with decades of relevant clinical expertise and robust clinical governance. This unique blend of perspectives and expertise ensures that Fortem's services are informed by real-world experiences while being grounded in evidence-based practices.

Lastly, Fortem maintains an open and continuous dialogue with stakeholders, fostering collaboration and actively seeking feedback. By engaging in ongoing communication with various stakeholders, Fortem stays attuned to the evolving needs of the community and ensure that its services remain aligned with those needs.

Collectively, these elements shape Fortem's suite of services, distinguishing Fortem Australia as the leading organisation in the field of building first responder resilience and the capability of disaster affected communities.

## **Strong alignment to the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework**

As highlighted in the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework, first responders are a cohort that require additional supports due to exposure to historical, repeat, and successive traumatic disaster events.

First responders are affected by severe stress due to their disaster response and recovery work, facing crisis outside the bounds of their everyday coping strategies (Australian Government National Mental Health Commission 2023).

To bolster the resilience of first responders impacted by disaster, Fortem Australia's services align closely to 'Key Components of Care' and types of interventions outlined in the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework including:

- **Specialised services:** mental health care provided by mental health care specialists. Fortem Australia's clinical program provides care coordination, telehealth and in-person psychology services to first responders and their families in regions where the support is needed most.
- **Focused non-specialised support:** psychosocial support is provided in Fortem Australia's community engagement, wellbeing activity and career management service to first responders and their families. These services are provided in person and online, ensuring there are minimal barriers to access.
- **Community and family support:** Fortem Australia is a family focused organisation that operates directly in disaster affected communities. Building family and community resilience is at the heart of what we do.
- **Practical support and advocacy:** Fortem Australia provides support services that have practical benefits to the mental health and wellbeing of first responder families. Our services build both skills and social networks that stand first responders in good stead in times of increased stress. Fortem Australia also develops and disseminates mental health information written specifically for the first responder family, focussing on pertinent content written in accessible language.

(Australian Government National Mental Health Commission 2023).

In addition, Fortem Australia's services are tightly integrated to the 'Guiding Principles' of the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework. At the community capacity level, Fortem Australia employs a multi-modal approach to mental health literacy and stigma reduction. We facilitate connections and resource sharing among senior leaders of emergency service agencies nationwide, reducing duplication and augmenting existing support services.

We engage with our participants and relevant stakeholders to facilitate access and ease referrals to other relevant services.



This ensures participants are informed and supported through the referral process to Fortem's internal psychology service; especially where there is poor mental health literacy and/or hesitancy around help-seeking.

Understanding the complexities of first responder work, Fortem Australia delivers services that are culturally sensitive and informed by the experiences of first responder families. Further, Fortem's service delivery staff possess extensive experience in supporting trauma-exposed communities.

Fortem Australia is an innovative not-for-profit organisation. We are the only organisation providing support services at scale to first responders and their families in disaster affected communities across Australia. Our effective services strengthen the capacity of first responders and families impacted by disaster through developing individual resilience and building networks of safety and support.

Fortem Australia's efforts are firmly in line with the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework. We are determined to collaborate with disaster-affected individuals, communities, multisector recovery partners, and all levels of government to guarantee the unified and dependable provision of services to first responders and their families.

Fortem Australia acknowledges the long-term nature of recovery and the need for sustained efforts to build resilience in first responder families affected by cascading disasters. Therefore, we resolutely advocate the significance of substantial and sustained funding to address the persistent need for specialised mental health support, which may arise months or even years following a disaster.

### **The need for independent community level support services**

In recent years, first responder agencies have opted to provide a variety of in-house mental health and wellbeing programs and services. Particular services include employee assistance programs, peer support, clinical triage and chaplaincy.

For some first responders, these services are effective and culturally appropriate, greatly improving the wellbeing of the first responder workforce. This demonstrates the continued importance of offering internal agency wellbeing supports.

Although there has been considerable investment across several decades, further efforts are still required. From recent research journals and government inquiries, it is submitted that responders display sub-optimal help seeking behaviour and experiences (Lawrence et al. 2018; Rikkers & Lawrence 2021; The Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Education and Employment References Committee 2019).



Entrenched stigma of mental health conditions is a known barrier to accessing timely and appropriate wellbeing supports. First responders are generally less likely to seek support if they hold stigma surrounding their own mental health or if they believe that their agency is not authentically committed to addressing mental health in the workplace (Britt & McFadden 2012; Gulliver et al. 2019; Haugen et al. 2017; Ridders & Lawrence 2021).

Another known barrier for many first responders is that in-house services provided by agencies are perceived as insufficient by the workforce and that seeking internal support is believed to be a career-limiting or career-ending decision (Britt & McFadden 2012; Gulliver et al. 2019; Haugen et al. 2017).

As such, first responders may feel more comfortable confiding in and engaging with external support organisations. To ensure that individuals have a buffet of internal and external supports available, first responders must feel empowered to access independent and community-based services.

Fortem Australia provides independent, external and confidential support, separate to the support provided by first responder agencies. This ensures that first responders and their families are able to access effective services that resonate with them with minimal barriers to engagement.

### **Contact Fortem Australia**

John Bale

████████████████████  
████████████████████  
████████████████

James Maskey

████████████████  
████████████████████  
████████████████

## Reference list

- Australian Government Department of Defence 2023, *National Defence Strategic Review*, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 110.
- Australian Government National Mental Health Commission 2023, *National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework*.
- Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2017. *National Principles for Disaster Recovery*. [online] Available at: <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery/>.
- Bennett, T 2022, 'Australia too dependent on ADF to deal with natural disasters', *Australian Financial Review*, 10 March.
- Britt, TW, & McFadden, AC 2012, 'Understanding mental health treatment-seeking in high stress occupations', *Contemporary occupational health psychology*, vol. 4, pp. 57 -73
- Beyond Blue Ltd 2020, *National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services (2016-2020): A summary of the three phases of Beyond Blue's research examining mental health and wellbeing in Australia's police and emergency services sector*, [https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl2008\\_pes2020\\_report\\_a4 .pdf](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl2008_pes2020_report_a4.pdf)
- Brady, PQ 2017, Crimes against caring: Exploring the risk of secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion satisfaction among child exploitation investigators. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 32(4), 305–318.
- Burnett, ME, Sheard, I & St Clair-Thompson, H 2020, The prevalence of compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction and perceived stress, and their relationships with mental toughness, individual differences and number of self-care actions in a UK police force. *Police Practice and Research*, 21(4), 383-400.
- Cole, KL, Keech, JJ, & Hamilton, K 2018, *Protecting police officers against burnout*. Griffith University. Report submitted to the Queensland Police Service. Accessed from <https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/10072/381884/1/Police%20Study%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- Drew JM & Martin, S 2022, *Biennial issues in policing survey: Preliminary findings*. Presentation to Leadership Matters Training Conference, Fraternal Order of Police. Nashville, Tennessee.
- Gulliver, SB, Pennington, ML, Torres, VA, Steffen, LE, Mardikar, A, Leto, F, Ostiguy, W, Zimering, RT & Kimbrel, NA 2019, 'Behavioral health programs in fire service: Surveying access and preferences.', *Psychological Services*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 340–345.
- Haugen, PT, McCrillis, AM, Smid, GE & Nijdam, MJ 2017, 'Mental health stigma and barriers to mental health care for first responders: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, vol. 94, pp. 218–229.
- Hilbrink, D 2022, 'The role of social connectedness in protecting first responder mental health and wellbeing', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, no. 37 (4), pp. 65–68.

Kyron, MJ, Ridders, W, Bartlett, J, Renehan, E, Hafekost, K, Baigent, M, Cunneen, R & Lawrence, D 2021, 'Mental health and wellbeing of Australian police and emergency services employees', *Archives of Environmental & Occupational Health*, pp. 1-11.

Lawrence, D, Kyron, M, Ridders, W, Bartlett, J, Hafekost, K, Goodsell, B & Cunneen, R 2018, 'Answering the call: national survey: Beyond Blue's National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services - Final report', *research repository.uwa.edu.au*.

Lawrence, D, Ridders, W, Houghton, S, Hunt, A, Bartlett, J, Lawn, S & Van Hooff, M 2021, 'After the Fires: The impacts of the 2019-20 black summer bushfires on the wellbeing of emergency services personnel', Perth: Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia.

Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management 2022, *South East Queensland Rainfall and Flooding February to March 2022 Review*, Queensland Government.

Ridders, W & Lawrence, D 2021, 'Mental health help-seeking experiences and service use among Australian first responders', *Australian Journal of Psychology*, pp. 1-9.

Shakespeare-Finch, J & Obst, PL 2011, 'The Development of the 2-Way Social Support Scale: A Measure of Giving and Receiving Emotional and Instrumental Support', *Journal of Personality Assessment*, vol. 93, no. 5, pp. 483-490.

The Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Education and Employment References Committee 2019. *The people behind 000: Mental health of our first responders*. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Education\\_and\\_Employment/Mentalhealth/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/Mentalhealth/Report)