

Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria

November 2024

Independent assurance report to Parliament
2024–25:7



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Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria

Independent assurance report to Parliament
Published by order, or under the authority,
of the Parliament of Victoria
November 2024

The Hon Shaun Leane MLC
President
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Melbourne

The Hon Maree Edwards MP
Speaker
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Melbourne

Dear Presiding Officers

Under the provisions of the *Audit Act 1994*, I transmit my report *Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria*.

Yours faithfully



Andrew Greaves
Auditor-General
28 November 2024

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Victoria. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their continuing culture, and to Elders past and present.

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Audit snapshot

Does Fire Rescue Victoria support its staff to maintain their mental health?

Why we did this audit

Every workplace is responsible for protecting, promoting and supporting its workers' mental health and wellbeing.

Emergency services organisations, such as Fire Rescue Victoria, have a heightened responsibility to support staff who are regularly exposed to or impacted by fires, medical emergencies and rescue situations.

We did this audit to see if Fire Rescue Victoria is supporting its staff to maintain their mental health.

Key background information



Fire Rescue Victoria has
4,755 staff



84% are firefighters



Fire Rescue Victoria
operates out of
85 fire stations



Fire Rescue Victoria
responded to
9,138 fires in 2022–23



Fire Rescue Victoria responded to
6,761 medical emergencies
in 2022–23

Source: VAGO.

What we concluded

Fire Rescue Victoria supports its staff to maintain their mental health. But it has gaps to address, including in how it identifies, monitors and manages mental health and wellbeing risks.

Fire Rescue Victoria promotes a mentally healthy workplace and organisational culture. All staff have access to a range of mental health and wellbeing services, training and information. Many staff who have used these services find them useful. Fire Rescue Victoria staff who are on secondment to the Country Fire Authority reported they are less aware of the support available to them.

Fire Rescue Victoria does not have a mental health strategy to holistically guide how it will identify, monitor and manage staff mental health and wellbeing risks in the short and long term. It also needs to improve how it collects and analyses data on mental health and wellbeing. It does not assess psychosocial hazards, but is working to address this gap. It also does not monitor staff's cumulative exposure to trauma.

Fire Rescue Victoria has a health screening process for firefighter applicants to assess if they are fit for the role. It has not fully documented this process and needs to improve some parts of it. It is doing some work to address these issues.

We made 6 recommendations for Fire Rescue Victoria to improve how it supports its staff to maintain their mental health.

1.

Our key findings

What we examined

Our audit followed 2 lines of inquiry:

1. Does Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) effectively support and promote a mentally healthy and supportive workplace and culture?
2. Does FRV proactively identify, monitor and manage its employees' mental health and wellbeing risks?

Other agencies involved in this audit

Some FRV staff are seconded to the Country Fire Authority (CFA). CFA works in partnership with FRV to support these staff. We consulted with CFA when we developed our engagement strategy and engaged with CFA during the audit on findings related to secondees.

We also consulted with the Department of Justice and Community Safety when we developed our engagement strategy.

WorkSafe Victoria gave us data about relevant workers compensation claims.

Background information

Firefighters play a vital role in protecting the Victorian community. They respond to fires, medical emergencies and rescue situations. FRV also contributes to statewide emergency management and coordination.

FRV has staff in both operational roles (firefighters) and non-operational roles (such as administrative staff). In June 2024 FRV had 4,755 staff, including 4,004 (84 per cent) in operational roles.

Due to the nature of their work, all FRV staff have a higher risk of experiencing or being exposed to stressful and potentially traumatic events. This means it is important that FRV supports all staff to maintain their mental health.

Fire service industry reform

In 2020 the Victorian Government reformed Victorian fire services:

Before the reform ...	After the reform ...
the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) operated in built-up areas of Melbourne and was staffed by career firefighters.	FRV was created to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• cover metropolitan Melbourne and major Victorian regional centres• bring together MFB firefighters and non-operational staff with career CFA firefighters and some CFA non-operational staff.
CFA operated in rural, regional and urban areas and was staffed by both career firefighters and volunteers.	CFA has continued to operate as a volunteer firefighting service. It no longer employs career firefighters. Some FRV staff go on secondment to CFA to support its operations and volunteers. In this report we refer to this cohort as 'secondees'. While on secondment at CFA, secondees are required to wear their FRV uniform.

Australian fire and rescue worker mental health and wellbeing

Two Australian studies have examined fire and rescue workers' mental health:

The ...	which was organised by ...	examined staff and volunteers from ...	as well as staff and/or volunteers from ...
2018 <i>Answering the call</i> study	Beyond Blue	33 fire and rescue organisations across Australia	ambulance, police and state emergency services.
2021 <i>After the Fires</i> study	the University of Western Australia in response to the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires	19 fire and rescue organisations across Australia	state emergency services.

FRV, and MFB before it, did not take part in these studies. We refer to these studies in more detail in Section 3.

Victorian Public Sector Commission's annual People Matter Survey

FRV has not participated in the Victorian Public Sector Commission's annual People Matter Survey. This survey covers topics including staff mental health and wellbeing and organisational culture.

VAGO survey of FRV staff

FRV has limited data on its staff's mental health and wellbeing. As part of this audit, we offered all FRV staff the opportunity to complete a survey to help us:

- collect data on their mental health
- better understand if FRV supports and promotes a supportive and mentally healthy workplace and culture.

We also sent our survey to FRV staff on secondment to CFA.

We based our survey on the 2018 and 2021 studies so we could compare FRV's results with similar organisations across Australia.

When comparing our results to *Answering the call*, we only included responses from fire and rescue employees. *After the fires* data includes results from a very small number of state emergency service employees. The impact of these results on fire and rescue employee data is likely to be negligible.

Beyond Blue's good practice framework

In 2020 Beyond Blue published the *Good practice framework for mental health and wellbeing in police and emergency services organisations* (good practice framework).

We used the good practice framework as our benchmark to review FRV's mental health support.

The framework promotes an integrated approach to supporting mental health. It combines initiatives that:

- 'protect' staff by reducing work-related risk factors for mental health conditions and increasing protective factors
- 'promote' good mental health by developing the positive aspects of work and workers' strengths and capabilities
- 'support' staff by addressing mental health difficulties and conditions among workers even if the workplace is not a contributing factor.

VAGO audits on public sector staff wellbeing

This is our third recent audit on the mental health and wellbeing of public sector staff. In 2023 we tabled 2 reports:

- *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, which looked at the health and wellbeing of government school principals
- *Employee Health and Wellbeing in Victorian Public Hospitals*, which looked at the mental health and wellbeing of public hospital staff.

What we found

This section focuses on our key findings, which fall into 3 areas:

1. FRV provides all staff with mental health support. But secondees reported less awareness of this support compared to other FRV staff.
2. FRV reviews some data on its mental health support. But it does not have a mental health strategy and does not monitor psychosocial hazards or cumulative exposure to trauma.
3. FRV has not fully documented its health screening process for firefighter applicants and it could improve some parts of the current process.

The full list of our recommendations, including agency responses, is at the end of this section.

Consultation with agencies

When reaching our conclusions, we consulted with the audited agencies and considered their views.

You can read their full responses in Appendix A.

Key finding 1: FRV provides all staff with mental health support. But secondees reported less awareness of this support compared to other FRV staff

Our survey and audit found that:

- FRV provides its staff with a range of mental health services, training and information
- staff experiences of this support are generally better than staff in comparable organisations
- senior leaders in FRV have demonstrated a commitment to supporting staff mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health services, training and information

FRV staff have access to a range of mental health and wellbeing services. FRV provides some of these services directly and outsources others, including an employee assistance program (EAP). Respondents to our survey reported a strong awareness of most of the available mental health services, with secondees reporting slightly less awareness.

FRV provides mental health training opportunities to all staff. While some training is available across the organisation, other training is targeted to staff at different stages of their career. Most survey respondents reported they were aware of this training, with secondees reporting slightly less awareness.

There are gaps in some of FRV's data on staff training, such as the number of staff who have attended mandatory mental health training. We discuss FRV's data collection and monitoring in more detail in Section 4.

Senior leaders promote FRV's mental health support through regular emails and as needed, such as following a work-related traumatic event. Forty-nine per cent of non-secondees who responded to our survey said FRV's communication about mental health safety issues that affect them was good. This was lower for secondee respondents at 21 per cent.

Staff experiences of support

Most staff who used FRV's support services in the last 12 months found them 'quite' or 'extremely' useful.

FRV performed better than the combined average for other state and territory fire and rescue organisations on 4 of the 5 indicators we surveyed. These indicators relate to managerial and organisational support for staff mental health.

For example, one indicator relates to whether staff believe their organisation is committed to making changes that promote mental health and wellbeing.

Senior leadership commitment to supporting staff mental health and wellbeing

FRV's executive leadership team is committed to supporting staff's mental health and wellbeing.

For example, in 2021 FRV added 14.8 full-time-equivalent staff to increase support for staff health and wellbeing. This was a 23.4 per cent increase in staff in its health, safety and wellbeing division.

Addressing key finding 1

To address this finding we made one recommendation for FRV to improve secondees' awareness of the mental health support available to them and how FRV communicates with secondees about mental health issues.

Key finding 2: FRV reviews some data on its mental health support. But it does not have a mental health strategy and does not monitor psychosocial hazards or cumulative exposure to trauma

We found that FRV:

- does not have a mental health and wellbeing strategy
- could use its data better to inform decisions
- does not proactively identify, document and assess psychosocial hazards but is working to address this
- does not track staff's cumulative exposure to trauma but intends to address this.

Need for a mental health and wellbeing strategy

Beyond Blue's good practice framework says emergency services organisations should develop a strategic plan, or strategy, to help them protect, promote and support their workers' mental health and wellbeing. The framework recommends 10 actions an organisation can take to develop a plan or strategy.

At the moment, FRV has 13 separate policies, strategies and other documents to guide its approach to supporting staff mental health. FRV has started developing a single comprehensive health, safety and wellbeing strategy that will include mental health.

A cohesive mental health strategy will help FRV be more strategic in how it supports staff mental health in the short and long term.

Using data to inform decisions

FRV collects and monitors some reliable data on its staff's mental health and wellbeing, such as the number of staff who access the EAP. But FRV also collects some data manually, which limits its reliability.

Overall, the data it collects on mental health is limited and there are gaps. For example, FRV does not know how many current staff have attended its mandatory mental health training. In addition, FRV does not thoroughly or systematically analyse the data it does collect to inform its decisions on mental health support.

FRV can use data from our survey to understand its employees' reported mental health and wellbeing at a point in time. It can also use our survey data as a baseline to inform future monitoring and evaluation.

FRV is aware of the gaps in how it collects, analyses and reports data. It is recruiting 2 new data and analytics roles to improve its data analysis capability.

Managing psychosocial hazards

FRV did a psychological health and safety desktop review between August 2023 and February 2024. The review found that FRV was not identifying, documenting and assessing psychosocial hazards.

FRV used the review to prepare an internal report that made 8 recommendations for it to improve how it oversees and manages psychosocial hazards. An FRV deputy commissioner endorsed the 8 recommendations in April 2024.

FRV has made some early progress on 2 of the recommendations, but it does not currently have a plan or timeline to implement all 8 recommendations.

Cumulative exposure to trauma

We asked FRV staff if they had experienced a stressful event or series of events either at work or away from work that deeply affected them. Eighty-four per cent of respondents answered 'yes' to this question. Of these respondents, 74 per cent said that the stressful event or series of events was 'at FRV'. Despite this, FRV does not track its staff's exposure to trauma. Consequently, it cannot identify staff who have been exposed to one or more potentially traumatic events.

FRV is participating in research led by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council to identify best-practice trauma tracking systems. It intends to use the outcomes of this research to help it develop its own trauma tracking system.

Addressing key finding 2

To address this finding we made 3 recommendations for FRV to:

- finalise its planned organisational health, safety and wellbeing strategy
- determine what data it needs to monitor:
 - staff mental health
 - the effectiveness of its mental health support
- monitor and address psychosocial hazards and their risks and track cumulative exposure to trauma.

Key finding 3: FRV has not fully documented its health screening process for firefighter applicants and it could improve some parts of the current process

Documenting the screening process

FRV requires firefighter applicants to successfully complete a health screening process before offering them the role. The screening includes a health questionnaire and a range of physical tests. FRV has not fully documented this process in a policy or procedure to outline its purpose, steps and requirements.

We analysed FRV's documentation for all the health screenings it did in March and November 2023. We found FRV did not consistently follow its process when it identified a mental health condition. This means FRV cannot ensure its screening process identified all applicants with current or previous mental health conditions and consequently assess their fitness for firefighting duties.

Modernising the screening process

FRV assesses applicants' fitness for firefighting duties against criteria from the *Australasian Fire Authorities Council Guidelines for Health and Fitness Monitoring for Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Workers* (2002) (the guidelines).

The guidelines have not been updated since 2002 and do not reflect the role of a contemporary firefighter. They also have limited information about mental health. Due to these limitations FRV has drafted, but not yet approved, its own medical standard. FRV intends to use this standard instead of the guidelines.

Improving the screening process

FRV has recently improved some parts of its screening process, including making a template for screening doctors to use when seeking information from an applicant's treating practitioner. It has also added 3 questions about mental health to its screening questionnaire.

Addressing key finding 3

To address this finding we made 2 recommendations for FRV to:

- fully document its existing pre-employment health screening process for firefighter applicants
- finalise and start using its draft health standard and associated medical standard and use the latter to update its screening process.

See the next page for the complete list of our recommendations, including agency responses.

2.

Our recommendations

We made 6 recommendations to address our findings. Fire Rescue Victoria has accepted these recommendations.

Agency response

Finding: Fire Rescue Victoria provides all staff with mental health support. But secondees reported less awareness of this support compared to other FRV staff (see Section 3)

Fire Rescue Victoria	1	Work with secondees, in consultation with the Country Fire Authority, to address the issues identified in our survey about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • secondees' awareness of available support • how Fire Rescue Victoria communicates with secondees about mental health issues. 	Accepted
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Finding: Fire Rescue Victoria reviews some data on its mental health support. But it does not have a mental health strategy and does not monitor psychosocial hazards or cumulative exposure to trauma (see Section 4)

Fire Rescue Victoria	2	Prioritise developing and implementing a best-practice employee health, safety and wellbeing strategy so it can proactively identify, monitor and manage risks to staff mental health and wellbeing.	Accepted
	3	Identify, collect and analyse data to monitor staff mental health. This should include psychosocial hazards and staff's cumulative exposure to trauma.	Accepted
	4	Monitor the take-up and analyse the effectiveness of the suite of mental health supports available to staff.	Accepted

Finding: Fire Rescue Victoria has not fully documented its health screening process for firefighter applicants and it could improve some parts of the current process (see Section 5)

Fire Rescue Victoria	5	Develop and implement a health standard in line with Action 2.3 in the Victorian Government's <i>Year Two to Five Fire Services Reform Implementation Plan</i> , including an accompanying medical standard. Fire Rescue Victoria should use its new medical standard to update its pre-employment health screening process for firefighter applicants.	Accepted
	6	Update and document its pre-employment health screening process for firefighter applicants.	Accepted

3.

Staff access to and awareness of mental health support

FRV provides mental health services, training and information to all its staff. In our survey, staff who accessed services for an emotional or a mental health issue in the last 12 months said they found them 'quite' or 'extremely' useful.

Overall, FRV staff reported better experiences of mental health support compared to staff in comparable organisations.

Staff awareness of the mental health support FRV offers is relatively high. However, secondees reported less awareness than other FRV staff. FRV was already aware of this issue and has undertaken a range of actions in conjunction with CFA to increase secondees' awareness of available support services and encourage them to seek help when needed.

Senior leaders at FRV have demonstrated a commitment to supporting staff mental health and wellbeing.

Covered in this section:

- Our survey and other mental health studies
- FRV's mental health support
- Staff experiences of FRV's support
- Senior leaders' commitment to supporting staff mental health and wellbeing

Our survey and other mental health studies

Our survey of FRV staff

In January and February 2024, we surveyed FRV staff to understand how FRV supports their mental health.

The survey asked questions about:

- work history
- physical health
- wellbeing
- mental health
- stressful experiences
- suicidal thoughts and behaviours
- work experiences
- workplace culture
- seeking support
- substance use
- demographics.

Approximately 18 per cent of all FRV staff (983 people) at the time responded to the survey.

Approximately 28 per cent of all secondees at the time (63 people) at the time responded to the survey.

Previous mental health studies

In 2018 Beyond Blue led a study called *Answering the call*. It surveyed the mental health and wellbeing of people working in fire and rescue, ambulance, police and state emergency services across Australia. At the time of the survey 33 of the 36 agencies in the sector participated. CFA took part but MFB did not.

In 2021 the University of Western Australia led a study called *After the Fires*. It surveyed how the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires impacted fire, rescue and state emergency services staff. Nineteen agencies from across Australia, including CFA, participated but FRV did not.

We compare data from our survey with data from these studies throughout this report.

FRV's mental health support

Mental health support

FRV offers staff a range of mental health support, including services, training and information that promotes awareness about maintaining good mental health.

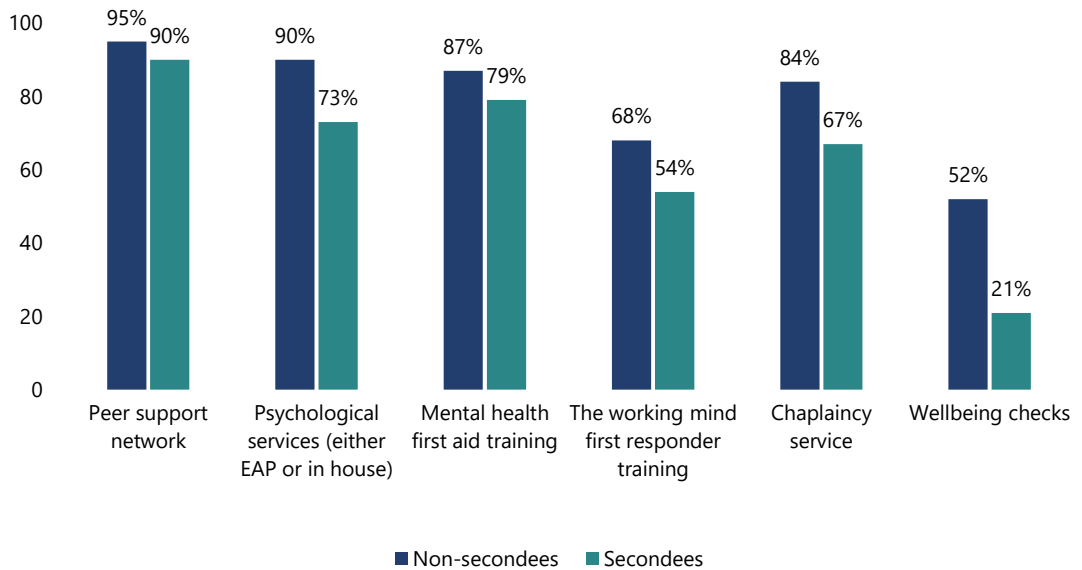
FRV offers ...	to ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health training • wellbeing checks, including group and individual wellbeing discussions led by a psychologist • wellness musters, which are an opportunity for staff to discuss challenges they may be facing in an open, honest and confidential space 	all staff.
a voluntary annual health check, which an external medical practitioner performs	all operational staff.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an employee assistance program (EAP) • chaplaincy, which involves non-denominational spiritual and pastoral care • in-house psychology services • peer support, which involves access to trained peers for personal and work-related issues 	all current and former FRV staff and their family members (with varying duration of access and eligibility for former staff and their families for EAP and in-house psychology services).
a separation medical check, which an external medical practitioner performs	all FRV staff who are leaving FRV.

Awareness of support

As Figure 1 shows, survey respondents reported strong awareness of these services and training. Overall, secondees reported less awareness.

We only listed a selection of FRV's mental health and wellbeing services and training in our survey question. This means we do not have data about staff awareness of its other support.

Figure 1: Proportion of FRV staff who reported they were aware of selected mental health support



Source: VAGO FRV staff survey.

Secondees' experience of support

Secondees have access to the same services, training and information as other FRV staff, but in our survey they reported less awareness of this support than other staff.

In 2021 FRV engaged with CFA's organisational wellbeing team and 17 seconded assistant chief fire officers and commanders to:

- understand the mental health issues that secondees were facing
- develop an action plan to address these issues.

The action plan had the following objectives:

- increase awareness of the available support services and encourage secondees to seek help where needed
- take proactive steps to help seconded staff maintain positive mental health and wellbeing
- provide best-practice interventions to support recovery.

The plan had 9 actions to achieve these objectives. FRV and CFA have completed or partially completed 8 of these actions.

FRV told us it is currently working with its secondment management department on 3 projects to improve communication with secondees and support their mental health.

Mental health training

FRV provides its staff with a range of mental health training opportunities. It targets training for different stages of a staff member's career.

FRV provides ...	to ...
the following mandatory courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'occupational stress' • 'distressed bystanders and self-care' • 'working mind first responders' 	all new staff.
targeted mandatory courses to help staff prepare for a role as a station officer, senior station officer and commander	staff seeking a promotion to these roles.
the following voluntary courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'the working mind first responders' • 'mental health first aid' 	all staff.
a voluntary 'retirement readiness' course	staff who are nearing retirement.
additional voluntary training about formally supporting their peers' mental health and wellbeing	staff who want to become a peer support officer.

FRV is drafting a mental health literacy framework to define what its staff and their families need to know about mental health at each stage of a staff member's career. It also intends to establish a mental health curriculum to train staff to the required level of proficiency.

We reviewed the spreadsheets FRV uses to manually record attendance at voluntary and mandatory training. We found many of these spreadsheets were missing entries and data for varying time periods.

We also found FRV does not collect attendance data for some of its training courses, including optional training courses on vicarious trauma, which it offers to corporate staff.

This means FRV cannot accurately confirm how many of its current staff have completed mandatory and/or voluntary training. This limits its:

- understanding of staff knowledge of mental health
- ability to make strategic decisions about future investments in staff mental health training.

Information-sharing across FRV

FRV shares information about mental health and wellbeing and its support services through a range of channels and in a variety of formats. For example:

- online via its intranet
- on posters at worksites
- through regular and one-off emails, such as when a staff member has died or when the media has covered a traumatic event involving FRV
- via face-to-face meetings and conversations with support staff.

Of the staff who responded to our survey:

- 49 per cent of non-secondees reported good communication by FRV about mental health safety issues that affect them
- 21 per cent of secondees reported good communication.

Reporting mental health issues

FRV provides 9 channels that staff can use to report a mental health issue.

Many of these channels can provide direct support to the staff member seeking support.

Of the staff who responded to our survey:

- 82 per cent of non-secondees said they knew where or how to report a mental health issue
- 51 per cent of secondees said they knew where or how to report a mental health issue.

Staff experiences of FRV's support

Usefulness of services

Of the 983 staff who responded to our survey, 232 said they had used FRV's mental health services in the last 12 months.

Most of these staff found the services 'quite' or 'extremely' useful.

	said they had accessed ...	And of those staff ...
115 staff	a psychologist through FRV.	89 (or 77 per cent) found the service 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'.
35 staff	a telephone counselling service through FRV.	22 (or 63 per cent) found the service 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'.
13 staff	another professional mental health service through FRV.	9 (or 69 per cent) found the service 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'.
10 staff	face-to-face self-help or a support group(s) through FRV.	8 (or 80 per cent) found the support 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'.

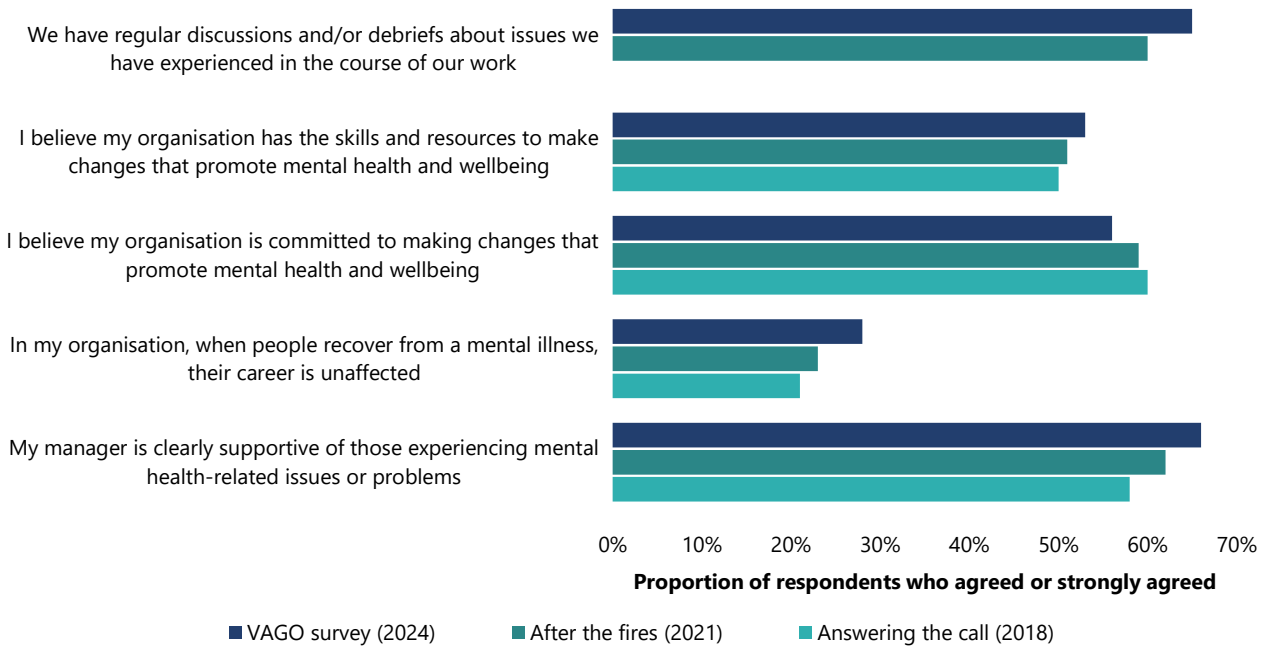
We also surveyed staff about 8 other services. But fewer than 10 respondents reported they had accessed them. We did not include these results to maintain the confidentiality of those respondents.

Comparison to similar organisations

We compared data from *After the fires* and *Answering the call* with FRV respondent data from our survey. We based our survey on these studies so we could compare FRV's results with those of similar organisations across Australia. Four questions relating to organisational culture were identical across the 3 datasets, and one additional question was the same in our survey and *After the fires*.

As Figure 2 shows, FRV performs better than the combined average for other state and territory fire and rescue organisations on 4 of 5 organisational culture indicators.

Figure 2: Organisational culture: VAGO's FRV survey results compared to fire and rescue employee responses to 2 previous national surveys



Note: *After the fires* data includes results from a very small number of state emergency service employees. However, the impact of these results on fire and rescue employee data is likely to be negligible. Data from *Answering the call* only uses results from fire and rescue employees. FRV did not take part in *After the fires* and MFB did not take part in *Answering the call*.
 Source: VAGO, based on data from *After the fires*, *Answering the call* and our FRV staff survey.

Senior leaders' commitment to supporting staff mental health and wellbeing

Organisational actions to support mental health and wellbeing

FRV's executive leadership team has demonstrated a commitment to staff mental health and wellbeing by investing in mental health support. This includes the ongoing provision of the range of mental health support we discuss earlier in this section.

In addition, Figure 3 outlines recent organisational initiatives the executive team has led to support staff wellbeing.

Figure 3: Strategic actions by FRV's executive leadership team to support staff mental health and wellbeing

Year	Action
2021	<p>Supported a restructure of FRV's health, safety and wellbeing division. This added 14.8 full-time-equivalent staff (a 23.4% increase for the division) and increased FRV's ongoing annual salary costs by an estimated \$1.9 million per annum</p> <p>Initiated and approved the <i>Fire Rescue Victoria Strategic Plan 2022–2032</i>, which lists people and culture, including their psychological safety and wellbeing, as one of its 5 key pillars</p> <p>Supported and approved FRV's new health model, which provides local services across the state that should facilitate better access for staff</p>
2022	<p>Approved an internal recommendation for FRV to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess psychosocial risks • analyse the effectiveness of controls to address these risks • identify gaps in its controls <p>Appointed a principal occupational psychologist, who led a psychological health and safety systems desktop review</p>
2023	Committed to developing comprehensive organisational health standards. These are still in draft
2024	<p>Approved the psychological health and safety systems desktop review recommendations report in April. Work has commenced to plan how FRV will implement the recommendations</p> <p>Appointed a director, health and wellbeing in April</p> <p>Commenced developing a mental health and wellbeing strategy</p>

Source: VAGO.

4.

Strategic oversight of staff mental health and support

FRV does not have a mental health strategy. This limits its ability to strategically identify, monitor and manage mental health risks across the organisation in the short and long term. FRV can also improve how it collects, analyses and uses data to inform decisions.

FRV does not assess psychosocial hazards and their risks. It also does not monitor staff's cumulative exposure to trauma, but it plans to address these gaps.

Covered in this section:

- Need for a mental health and wellbeing strategy
- Using data to inform decisions
- Not assessing psychosocial hazards
- Not tracking cumulative exposure to trauma

Need for a mental health and wellbeing strategy

Beyond Blue's 10 actions for a mental health strategy

The good practice framework outlines 10 actions an organisation can take to strategically support staff mental health:

1. develop an overarching strategy based on an integrated approach to mental health
 2. involve frontline workers in planning, developing, implementing and evaluating the strategy
 3. involve representatives from other areas of the organisation in developing the strategy
 4. take a whole-of-career approach to mental wellbeing
 5. include mental health in its regular risk assessments
 6. identify a champion or sponsor from senior management to be responsible for the strategy and regularly reporting against it
 7. ensure multiple people have organisational knowledge of the mental health strategy so momentum in supporting staff to maintain their mental health is not lost when staff move into other roles or leave the organisation
 8. regularly evaluate the initiatives it implements under the strategy
 9. consider the possible benefits of external research collaborations or partnerships
 10. consider how it can include families and other social support in mental health support.
-

No mental health strategy

In the absence of a mental health and wellbeing strategy, FRV uses 13 separate internal and external policies, strategies and other documents, including:

- *Fire Rescue Victoria Strategic Plan 2022–2032*
- Health Safety and Wellbeing 36-month horizon outlook
- Work Health Safety Policy.

A single, cohesive mental health strategy would help FRV to be more strategic in how it supports staff mental health in the short and long term. Without a mental health and wellbeing strategy it is difficult for FRV to realise the good practice framework's recommended actions.

In April 2024 FRV recruited a director, health and wellbeing. The director is developing a health, safety and wellbeing strategy that covers mental health, but FRV does not currently have an expected completion date for this.

Using data to inform decisions

Good-practice benchmark for data analysis

The good practice framework recommends an organisation uses a systematic approach to manage workplace risks that affect, or could affect, staff mental health.

It recommends analysing available data to identify and mitigate risks.

Available data

FRV collects, analyses and reports some information on staff mental health and wellbeing.

It uses this data to inform some decisions and identify staff who have a higher risk of poor mental health.

FRV collects data from ...	including information about ...
its applicant health screenings	the number of new staff who have disclosed a mental illness and the types and severity of those illnesses.
its in-house psychology services and EAP	the number of staff, retirees and family members who have engaged with these services. It also collects de-identified information about: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• why they engaged the service• any reported mental health conditions• treatment• outcomes.
its OHS management system FRVSafe	all reported mental health incidents, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• exposure to trauma• bullying and harassment• treatment (when details are disclosed).
WorkSafe Victoria's workers compensation claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• reasons for claims• time lost• return to work statuses and rates• claim costs.
its voluntary annual health monitoring	psychological distress scores.

2024 VAGO survey

Our survey has provided the first comprehensive, population-level mental health and wellbeing dataset on FRV staff. It includes data on:

- staff mental health and wellbeing
- staff awareness and experiences of the mental health and wellbeing support FRV offers.

FRV can use this data:

- to understand its staff's current mental health and wellbeing
 - as a baseline to inform future monitoring and evaluation.
-

Using data

FRV used data from mental injury workers compensation claims to support its decision to restructure its health, safety and wellbeing division in 2021.

In 2021 and 2023 it used training participation data to support its decision to continue running mental health literacy training programs.

Aside from these 2 examples, FRV has not used available data to inform its decisions on its mental health support.

Need for more data analysis

FRV does not have reliable data on how many staff have used its mental health services.

As we discuss in Section 3, FRV keeps manual records of staff training attendance. It does not accurately record the number of current staff who have completed mandatory and voluntary training.

FRV's incomplete and inaccurate data and an absence of trend analysis and reporting make it difficult for it to:

- get an accurate, holistic picture of staff mental health and wellbeing
 - assess if its mental health services and initiatives are being used and are effective.
-

Psychosocial hazards

Good-practice benchmark for managing psychosocial hazards

The good practice framework recommends that an organisation identifies, documents, assesses and controls psychosocial hazards.

The framework says that 'psychosocial factors', or hazards, include 'the way work is carried out (deadlines, workload, work methods) and the context in which work occurs (including relationships and interactions with managers and supervisors, colleagues and co-workers, and members of the community)'.

FRV's psychological health and safety desktop review

FRV did a psychological health and safety desktop review between August 2023 and February 2024.

The review found that FRV was not identifying, documenting and assessing psychosocial hazards and their risks.

The review informed a report that had 8 recommendations. The deputy commissioner approved the report, including its recommendations, in April 2024.

The recommendations aim to improve how FRV identifies, documents and assesses psychosocial hazards and their risks by:

1. prioritising projects, systems and initiatives in the 'prevent harm' category
2. developing a psychological health and safety systems evaluation strategy
3. engaging an external consultant to objectively review the strategy
4. setting up a steering committee and project team
5. finalising a project delivery plan
6. conducting phase 2 of collecting quantitative and qualitative data with key accountability holders and stakeholders
7. incorporating psychological health and safety terminology into data collection
8. doing a baseline psychosocial risk assessment survey and running supplementary focus groups.

FRV has made some early progress towards recommendations 3 and 5. It does not have an agreed plan or timeline to implement all 8 recommendations yet.

Using data to assess psychosocial hazards

FRV could improve how it assesses psychosocial hazards by collecting and analysing data from existing sources, such as its:

- OHS management system FRVSafe
- EAP
- in-house psychology services
- peer support program
- wellbeing checks
- wellness musters
- chaplains.

These sources either provide or could provide a range of data about psychosocial hazards, including data about bullying, harassment, discrimination, job demands, physical safety, organisational culture and work-life balance.

Survey results about FRV's psychosocial climate

Our survey asked multiple questions about the psychosocial climate at FRV, including questions about:

- bullying
- discrimination
- harassment.

Our survey found:

- 21.2 per cent of respondents reported being bullied at work over the last 12 months
 - 22.3 per cent of respondents reported personally experiencing discrimination at work over the last 12 months
 - 20.6 per cent of respondents reported that they had been harassed or assaulted verbally in the course of their work, 'sometimes', 'often' or 'very often'.
-

Cumulative exposure to trauma

Good practice for monitoring exposure to trauma

According to the good practice framework, cumulative exposure to trauma can contribute to a person developing a mental health condition. Some people also develop a condition after being exposed to a single traumatic incident.

Regular screening helps to proactively detect mental health risks. Tracking staff who are exposed to trauma can help an organisation target intervention strategies before staff mental health deteriorates.

Current responses to trauma

FRV activates its peer support network every time a staff member is exposed to a potentially traumatic event. A peer support officer then follows up and supports affected staff.

Not tracking trauma exposure

FRV does not track the number and types of potentially traumatic events staff are exposed to. If FRV collected this information it could:

- start monitoring staff mental health and wellbeing over time
- take appropriate preventative action
- connect staff to necessary support.

FRV is currently participating in research led by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council. This research aims to identify best-practice trauma tracking systems.

FRV intends to use the outcomes of the research to develop its own trauma tracking system.

FRV staff's exposure to trauma

Our survey data shows that many FRV staff have experienced a potentially traumatic event or events during their work at FRV.

We asked if staff had experienced a stressful event or series of events either at work or away from work that deeply affected them. Eighty-four per cent of respondents answered 'yes' to this question. Of these respondents, 74 per cent said that the stressful event or series of events was 'at FRV'.

We also asked how often staff are put in emotionally disturbing situations. Over 19 per cent of respondents said 'often' or 'always'.

FRV staff reported similar rates of high and very high psychological distress, low mental wellbeing, diagnosed depression, anxiety and PTSD as respondents from *Answering the call*.

5.

Health screening process for firefighter applicants

FRV's recruitment process for firefighter applicants includes a health screening. The health screening involves tests that help FRV assess if an applicant is fit for firefighting duties. But FRV has not fully documented its process. And it does not consistently follow its current process when it identifies a mental health condition.

FRV based its screening criteria on guidelines that have limited information about mental health and firefighters' work. It is working to modernise its screening process. This includes developing an updated medical standard.

Covered in this section:

- About firefighter recruitment
- FRV's documentation of its health screening process
- Modernising the screening process
- Improving the screening process

About firefighter recruitment

Good practice for mental health screening

The good practice framework says screening applicants can help an organisation promote the mental health of its staff. It recommends that an organisation should:

- consider including mental health assessments as part of its broader recruitment process
 - engage psychologists or suitably qualified and accredited providers to do psychological screening assessments
 - use these psychological assessments, in conjunction with other screening and assessment methods, to determine an applicant's suitability for the role.
-

Firefighter recruitment process

FRV recruits new firefighters based on:

- physical aptitude testing
- interviews
- a written assessment
- a health screening, which it refers to as a pre-employment medical assessment.

During a health screening a doctor assesses the applicant's fitness for firefighting duties against the *Australasian Fire Authorities Council Guidelines for Health and Fitness Monitoring for Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Workers (2002)* (the guidelines).

FRV's documentation of its health screening process

Not documenting the process

FRV has a duty of care to both its staff and the community to ensure firefighters are medically, physically and psychologically capable of performing their required duties. FRV fulfils this duty by screening firefighter applicants.

FRV has not documented its health screening process from end to end. It has not clearly outlined the:

- purpose, steps and requirements of the process
- roles and responsibilities of staff who lead each step of the process.

Instead, knowledge of the process is:

- held by a limited number of staff
- documented in several separate documents, which cover discrete parts of the process.

This increases the risk that staff involved in the process:

- may not follow it consistently
 - may be unclear about some steps.
-

Our understanding of FRV's process

FRV's screening process, as it relates to mental health, involves:

- the applicant completing a health questionnaire and doing a range of physical tests with a doctor
- the doctor and the applicant discussing any information that indicates the applicant has, or may have, a mental health condition.

If the doctor believes the applicant has, or may have, a mental health condition, they write a letter to the applicant's treating practitioner to request further information. The letter describes the inherent requirements of the firefighter role and asks the practitioner if they believe:

- the applicant's condition would impact their ability to perform the role
- the demands of the role would impact the applicant's condition.

The screening doctor prepares a report about the applicant's fitness for the firefighter role based on the treating practitioner's response.

FRV then makes the final decision on whether or not the applicant is medically fit for the role.

Modernising the screening process

The guidelines In 2002 the then Australasian Fire Authorities Council published the guidelines to protect firefighters from injuries and illness while maintaining their confidentiality.

The guidelines:

- explain how 18 different kinds of medical conditions, including 'psychiatric disorders', may impact a person's fitness to be a firefighter
- provide a 'model medical questionnaire'
- note that the guidelines may be reviewed and updated in the future.

FRV told us that the guidelines are outdated because they:

- do not currently reflect the role of a contemporary firefighter
 - have limited information about:
 - how different mental illnesses may impact a firefighter's ability to do their job
 - the impact that firefighting may have on a person's mental health.
-

New health model

The Victorian Government set an action for FRV to develop and implement a contemporary health model by June 2023 in its *Year Two to Five Fire Services Reform Implementation Plan*.

Specifically, the plan said that FRV needs to develop a health model that 'establishes state-wide comprehensive organisational health standards, policies and support mechanisms' so it can appropriately support its staff throughout Victoria.

FRV acquitted this action in October 2023. But it has neither completed all the 'health standards, policies and support mechanisms' nor has it set a completion date for the outstanding items.

FRV told us that its health model will include a new medical standard. It has drafted but not approved the new standard. FRV intends to use the new medical standard instead of the guidelines in its health screening process.

Improving the screening process

Questionnaire before April 2024

FRV uses a questionnaire during its screening process to detect mental health conditions. The questionnaire uses the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21), which rates an applicant's level of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms based on their responses to a set of statements.

The guidelines' 'model medical questionnaire' includes 3 questions specifically about an applicant's mental health. Before April 2024 FRV's questionnaire did not explicitly ask applicants about their mental health but had 4 questions where an applicant could disclose a mental health condition:

- 'Are you currently attending a health professional for any illness or injury?'
 - 'Have you taken any medication, drugs, vitamins or supplements in the last month?'
 - 'During the past year, approximately how many days were you away from school or work because of illness? Reason(s)?'
 - 'Have you ever had any other serious injury, illness, operations, or been in hospital for any reason?'
-

Our review of FRV's 2023 questionnaires

We reviewed the questionnaires FRV used in its March and November 2023 recruitment rounds. None of the 269 applicants recorded DASS-21 ratings above 'mild'. Consequently, the screening doctors did not suspect a mental health condition.

However, 10 applicants did disclose other information that indicated they may have had a mental health condition. In particular:

- all 10 applicants said they took medication related to mental health in the month before they applied for the role
- one applicant additionally disclosed that they were seeing a mental health professional.

By not explicitly asking about mental health, FRV could not ensure its screening process identified all applicants with current or prior mental health conditions.

Improving the questionnaire

In April 2024 FRV revised its questionnaire to explicitly ask about mental health. The questionnaire now also asks:

- 'Have you ever experienced or been diagnosed with a mental health condition or psychiatric illness?'
 - 'Have you ever sought psychological treatment or support from a psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor, GP or other mental health professional?'
 - 'Do you experience claustrophobia?'
-

Improving guidance and processes for screening doctors

FRV expects the screening doctor to always seek further information from an applicant's treating practitioner if they identify a potential mental health condition.

However, FRV's training material for screening doctors says they 'may' need to obtain a treating practitioner's report to complete an applicant's psychiatric assessment. As a result, screening doctors may not always follow FRV's intended process.

Before April 2024 FRV did not give screening doctors a template to request further information from treating practitioners. This led to inconsistencies in the information that screening doctors gave to and requested from practitioners.

For example, not all letters from the screening doctor to the treating practitioner described the inherent requirements of the firefighter role. This left treating practitioners to do their own research or provide advice without the necessary occupational context.

FRV developed a letter template for screening doctors to start using in the April 2024 recruitment round.

FRV's process for the DASS-21 is also unclear for screening doctors. If an applicant is rated 'moderate', 'severe' or 'extremely severe' on the DASS-21 but has not seen a treating practitioner, FRV's process does not specify if or how the screening doctor should seek additional information to assess their fitness for the role.

6.

Appendices

There are 4 appendices covering responses from audited agencies, information about how we perform our work and our FRV staff survey.

Appendix A: Submissions and comments

Appendix B: Abbreviations, acronyms and glossary

Appendix C: Audit scope and method

Appendix D: Respondent demographics for our FRV staff survey

Appendix A:

Submissions and comments

We have consulted with the Country Fire Authority, Department of Justice and Community Safety, Fire Rescue Victoria and WorkSafe Victoria, and we considered their views when reaching our audit conclusions. As required by the *Audit Act 1994*, we gave a draft copy of this report, or relevant extracts, to those agencies and asked for their submissions and comments.

Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of those comments rests solely with the relevant agency head.

Responses received

Agency	Page
Fire Rescue Victoria	A-2
Country Fire Authority	A-6



Ref/OOC-136

Friday, 8 November 2024

[Redacted]

Victorian Auditor- General's Office
Level 31, 35 Collins Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Via Email: [Redacted]

Dear [Redacted]

RE: 2024 Provisional report: Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria Audit

We thank the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) for their comprehensive audit of staff wellbeing at FRV. While the report identified areas for improvement, it is also an acknowledgment of the significant strides we have made in recent years to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of our employees.

While we are proud of the progress we have made, we recognise there is always room for improvement. We have accepted all six recommendations and will develop a comprehensive action plan to implement these improvements. Our focus remains on creating a supportive and caring workplace culture where every employee feels valued, safe, and empowered.

I want to commend our dedicated staff for their ongoing efforts in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our people. Our peoples' wellbeing is paramount, and we will continue to invest in programs, resources, and support services to ensure this.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Gavin Freeman AFSM
Commissioner
Fire Rescue Victoria

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Fire Rescue Victoria action plan to address recommendations from Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria

No.	VAGO recommendation	Acceptance	Agreed management actions	Target completion date
1	<p>Work with secondees, in consultation with the Country Fire Authority, to address the issues identified in our survey about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • secondees' awareness of available support • how Fire Rescue Victoria communicates with secondees about mental health issues. 	<p>Acceptance</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> In part <input type="checkbox"/> In principle</p>	<p>Agreed management actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with CFA to identify opportunities for collaboration • Invite a secondee representative to sit on the Peer Support Working Group to inform future decisions about wellbeing supports and communications for the secondee group • Meet with FRV Secondee Management Team to identify opportunities for collaboration and enhancement of support and awareness of support for secondees • Continue communicating via known channels (such as CFA intranet page, CFA emails) to secondees about mental health literacy programs, wellbeing check and peer support visitations 	31 st January, 2025
2	<p>Prioritise developing and implementing a best-practice employee health, safety and wellbeing strategy so it can proactively identify, monitor and manage risks to staff mental health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>Acceptance</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> In part <input type="checkbox"/> In principle</p>	<p>Agreed management actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct facilitated discussions within the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Department to develop key elements of a departmental strategy. • Consult with broader stakeholders, including all districts, on the strategy in a staged approach. • Develop strategy based on consultation. 	30 th June, 2025

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

<p>3</p> <p>Identify, collect and analyse data to monitor staff mental health. This should include psychosocial hazards and staff's cumulative exposure to trauma.</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> In part <input type="checkbox"/> In principle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore data management systems, seek approval for implementation and implement system • Finalise project plan for psychosocial risk management, and undertake next steps (including seeking external consultancy support) • Continue engaging with AFAC on trauma tracker project, seeking to implement a system based on best practice recommendations 	<p>30th June, 2025</p>
<p>4</p> <p>Monitor the take-up and analyse the effectiveness of the suite of mental health supports available to staff.</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> In part <input type="checkbox"/> In principle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linked to the above action, explore data management systems, seek approval for implementation and implement system • Develop reporting framework for mental health to inform future decisions 	<p>30th June, 2025</p>
<p>5</p> <p>Develop and implement a health standard in line with item 2.3 in the Victorian Government's <i>Year Two to Five Fire Services Reform Implementation Plan</i>, including an accompanying medical standard. Fire Rescue Victoria should use its new medical standard to update its pre-employment health screening process for firefighter applicants.</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> In part <input type="checkbox"/> In principle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A draft of the health standards, and the medical component, has been developed in 2023. • The draft is currently being updated. • The UFU has been contacted for consultation • Once the standards have been developed these will be implemented where relevant, such as the pre-employment health screening process • Planned cyclic revision to be included in the endorsement process 	<p>30th June 2025</p>

OFFICIAL: Sensitive

6	Update and document its pre-employment health screening process for firefighter applicants.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> In part <input type="checkbox"/> In principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The pre-employment health screening process is dependent on the development of a Health Standard. Meet with stakeholders (Recruitment, Medical Services, Cogent) to obtain current process information incorporate previous and current team learnings (at end of campaign review by mid December 2024) to reflect up to date process 	30 th June 2025
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Office of CEO | Headquarters
8 Lakeside Drive Burwood East Vic 3151
Tel 03 9262 8444

Mr Andrew Greaves
Auditor General
Victorian Auditor-General's Office
Level 31, 35 Collins Street
MEBLBOURNE VIC 3000

8 November 2024

By email: [REDACTED]

Dear Mr Greaves

Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in response to your report about staff wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV).

As set out in sections 25B(3) and 25(C) of the Fire Rescue Victoria Act, and a subsequent Secondment Agreement with CFA, FRV is required to provide CFA with 242 senior operational leaders, including 160 Assistant Chief Fire Officers and Commanders, 53 instructors and 29 practice area drill (PAD) supervisors and operators. These officers are key to CFA's operational capability and are integrated across a range of CFA functions and sites. They are essential and important members of CFA and as such are provided access to all CFA's support and wellbeing arrangements.

Since Fire Services Reform came into effect on 1 July 2020, CFA has experienced a persistent pattern of unrelieved positions at any one time across CFA, particularly in the ACFO and Commander cohorts (during the time of your staff survey, this was as high as 21 positions across the State or 13.1%, however has been as high as 33 positions or 20.1% during other times within 2023-24).

This results in a number of specific issues that are outside those set out in your report in relation to our seconded staff cohort including:

- Increased workload and fatigue. This is a direct result of seconded staff covering unfilled or unrelieved roles, and in many cases, staff feeling unable or limited in their ability to take planned leave (particularly as in many cases their role would be unlikely to be filled, resulting in a further workload increases on their return). There are also consequent workload impacts on CFA's professional and technical staff.

OUR COMMUNITY • OUR CFA

Response provided by the Interim Chief Executive Officer, Country Fire Authority, *continued*

- High levels of unplanned leave. Currently 11% of ACFO/Commander staff and 25% of Instructors seconded to CFA are on unplanned leave. This includes leave taken by staff to address and maintain wellbeing.
- Conflicting working arrangements. The secondment agreement between FRV and CFA is unique and effectively involves the entire middle operational management level of CFA being selected and organised by another organisation. This includes FRV being responsible for standard human resource and wellbeing management arrangements without a direct operational connection to the work being performed while they are at CFA and under the operational command and control of the CFA Chief Officer. In practical terms a seconded staff member is often expected to reconcile what can be conflicting positions. For example, CFA may require an activity to be performed (such as attending an election process for a volunteer brigade which will occur in the evening), but FRV settings may not permit overtime for the activity to be completed. Many secondees attempt to reconcile these conflicts themselves because they are motivated to provide appropriate support for volunteers, but which can add to work complexity, increased levels of stress and poor outcomes.
- Perceptions about disconnect from FRV. This includes uncertainty in some cases about support arrangements offered by FRV (as you note in your report) along with limited professional development and career opportunities, which may then have further impacts on wellbeing.

CFA continues to work with FRV (through the CFA-FRV Heads of Agency Steering Committee) and Government (through the Fire Services Reform Executive Committee) to highlight these issues and seek to mitigate the risks. The CFA Chief Officer's seasonal attestations to the Emergency Management Commissioner also highlight the operational impacts of the secondment model.

CFA takes seriously the health and wellbeing of all its people – whether they be volunteers, staff or secondees. In addition to the support arrangements provided by FRV and covered by your report, CFA has attempted to put in place arrangements to address issues relating to the operation of secondment arrangements. While these are important initiatives designed to support the wellbeing of FRV staff working at CFA, they are ultimately limited by the underlying rate of unfilled and unrelieved positions. This is outside CFA's control.

Supplementary arrangements will continue to be required, and potentially expanded, until such time as the high ongoing rates of vacant and unrelieved seconded roles are reduced. At this stage, it is not clear when this will be. On this basis, CFA supports your recommendation about the need to raise seconded awareness of available support and improve the way FRV communicates with secondees about mental health safety issues.

Response provided by the Interim Chief Executive Officer, Country Fire Authority, *continued*

CFA looks forward to working collaboratively with FRV to implement actions relating to FRV staff seconded to CFA and I would also like to take the opportunity to thank your staff who have worked on this report.

Yours sincerely,



Robyn Harris
Interim Chief Executive Officer

Appendix B:

Abbreviations, acronyms and glossary

Abbreviations We use the following abbreviations in this report:

Abbreviation	Full spelling
good practice framework	<i>Good practice framework for mental health and wellbeing in police and emergency services organisations</i>
the guidelines	<i>Australasian Fire Authorities Council Guidelines for Health and Fitness Monitoring for Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Workers (2002)</i>

Acronyms We use the following acronyms in this report:

Acronym	Full spelling
CFA	Country Fire Authority
DASS-21	Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale 21
EAP	employee assistance program
FRV	Fire Rescue Victoria
MFB	Metropolitan Fire Brigade
VAGO	Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Glossary

The following terms are included in or relevant to this report:

Term	Explanation
Career firefighter	A firefighter who is employed by a firefighting organisation.
Level of assurance	<p>This is a measure of the confidence we have in our conclusions. The quality and quantity of evidence we obtain affects our level of assurance.</p> <p>We design our work programs with the information needs of our report users in mind. We consider if we need to provide them with reasonable assurance or if a lower level of assurance may be appropriate.</p>
Limited assurance	<p>We obtain less assurance when we rely primarily on an agency's representations and other evidence generated by that agency. However, we aim to have enough confidence in our conclusion for it to be meaningful. We call these types of engagements assurance reviews and typically express our opinions in negative terms. For example, 'nothing has come to our attention to indicate there is a problem.'</p> <p>See our assurance services fact sheet for more information.</p>
Reasonable assurance	<p>We achieve reasonable assurance by obtaining and verifying direct evidence from a variety of internal and external sources about an agency's performance. This enables us to draw a conclusion against an objective with a high level of assurance. We call these performance audits.</p> <p>See our assurance services fact sheet for more information.</p>
Seconded	An FRV staff member who is currently on secondment at CFA to support its operations and volunteers.
Volunteer firefighter	A firefighter who volunteers for a firefighting organisation.

Appendix C:

Audit scope and method

Scope of this audit

Who we examined

We examined the following agency:

Agency	Its key responsibilities
FRV	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responding to fires, complex rescues, road crashes, emergency medical calls and hazardous chemical spills across Melbourne and Victoria's major regional centres• Educating the community about preventing fires• Reforming operational and strategic policy

Other agencies involved in this audit

Some FRV staff are seconded to CFA. CFA works in partnership with FRV to support these staff. We consulted with CFA when we developed our engagement strategy and engaged with it during the audit on findings related to secondees.

We also consulted with the Department of Justice and Community Safety when we developed our engagement strategy.

WorkSafe Victoria gave us data about relevant workers compensation claims.

Our audit objective

To determine whether FRV supports its staff to maintain their mental health.

What we examined

We examined how FRV supported its staff's mental health between 2020 and 2024.

We also considered historical information from MFB from 2018–20 where relevant.

We examined how FRV:

- ensures firefighter recruits are medically fit for the role
- educates its staff about mental health
- builds a supportive culture
- makes decisions about staff mental health
- prepares staff for life after retirement.

We also analysed data from WorkSafe Victoria about:

- FRV from 2020 to 2023
- MFB from 2018 to 2020.

Aspects of performance examined

Our mandate for performance audits and reviews includes the assessment of economy, effectiveness, efficiency and compliance (often referred to as the '3Es + C').

In this audit we focused on the following aspects:

Economy	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Compliance
○	●	○	○

Key:

- Primary focus
- Secondary focus
- Not assessed

Conducting this audit

Assessing performance

To form a conclusion against our objective we used the following lines of inquiry and associated evaluation criteria.

Line of inquiry	Criteria
1. FRV effectively supports and promotes a mentally healthy and supportive workplace and culture.	1.1 Appropriate screening is in place to ensure recruitment of suitable employees to reduce the risk of mental illness.
	1.2 Mental health awareness information and training is provided to all employees.
	1.3 A clearly communicated and promoted mental health and wellbeing strategy is in place incorporating policies, programs and practices that address FRV's specific risk profile.
	1.4 Senior leadership takes responsibility and is accountable for creating a workplace culture that actively supports good mental health.
2. FRV proactively identifies, monitors and manages employees' mental health and wellbeing risks.	2.1 Management proactively identifies, documents and assesses psychosocial hazards and the associated risk to their employees and uses this information to inform its mental health and wellbeing strategy.
	2.2 FRV promotes a culture of open communication and support, providing employees with accessible avenues to report incidents and signs of poor mental health.
	2.3 Management captures, analyses and reports appropriate information on mental health and wellbeing of the FRV workforce to inform decision-making and identify workers at high risk.
	2.4 Management monitors trends and changes to employee mental health and wellbeing over time.
	2.5 Employees, including those transitioning out of active service, have access to a range of varied and accessible professional advisory and support service options.

Our methods

As part of the audit we:

- surveyed FRV staff about their mental health and wellbeing in January and February 2024
 - reviewed the relevant policies, procedures, plans and processes FRV has used from 2020 to 2024
 - evaluated how FRV collected and used data about staff wellbeing from 2020 to 2024
 - analysed WorkSafe Victoria's data about:
 - FRV from 2020 to 2023
 - MFB from 2018 to 2020.
-

Compliance

We conducted our audit in accordance with the *Audit Act 1994* and ASAE 3500 *Performance Engagements* to obtain reasonable assurance to provide a basis for our conclusion.

We complied with the independence and other relevant ethical requirements related to assurance engagements.

Cost and time

The full cost of the audit and preparation of this report was \$860,000.

The duration of the audit was 15 months from initiation to tabling.

Appendix D:

Respondent demographics for our FRV staff survey

We conducted a mental health and wellbeing survey of FRV staff between 18 January 2024 and 14 February 2024. This is the first time that a comprehensive, population-level data set on FRV staff mental health and wellbeing has been collected.

The table below sets out the demographics of the FRV staff respondents to the survey.

Our survey had 983 respondents, which was 17.6 per cent of all FRV staff at the time of the survey. It also had 63 responses from secondees, which was 28.3 per cent of all secondees at the time of the survey.

Figure D1: FRV staff demographics

Demographic	Variable	Percentage of total respondents
Where the respondents reside	Metropolitan	65.9
	Regional/rural	34.1
Gender	Man	78.5
	Woman	20.2
	Self-described	1.2
Time worked at FRV (including time at MFB or as a staff member at CFA)	<12 months	4.6
	1–2 years	7.5
	3–5 years	13.6
	6–10 years	20.0
	>10 years	54.2
Nature of position	Operational	66.9
	Non-operational	23.2
	Both operational and non-operational	7.5
	Other	2.3

Source: VAGO FRV staff survey.

Note: Values have been rounded so may not add up to 100 per cent for each demographic.

Auditor-General's reports tabled in 2024–25

Report title	Tabled
<i>Results of 2023 Audits: Technical and Further Education Institutes</i> (2024–25: 1)	July 2024
<i>Building a Capable and High-performing Public Service Workforce</i> (2024–25: 2)	August 2024
<i>Protecting the Biosecurity of Agricultural Plant Species</i> (2024–25: 3)	October 2024
<i>Responses to Performance Engagement Recommendations: Annual Status Update 2024</i> (2024–25: 4)	October 2024
<i>Auditor-General's Report on the Annual Financial Report of the State of Victoria 2023–24</i> (2024–25: 5)	November 2024
<i>Fair Presentation of Service Delivery Performance 2024</i> (2024–25: 6)	November 2024
<i>Staff Wellbeing in Fire Rescue Victoria</i> (2024–25: 7)	November 2024

All reports are available for download in PDF and HTML format on our website at <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au>

Our role and contact details

The Auditor-General's role

For information about the Auditor-General's role and VAGO's work, please see our online fact sheet [About VAGO](#).

Our assurance services

Our online fact sheet [Our assurance services](#) details the nature and levels of assurance that we provide to Parliament and public sector agencies through our work program.

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