Interactive Qualifying Project

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SUPPORTING THOSE WHO SUPPORT YOU:

The Experiences of Emergency Service Workers' Families

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WPI

SUPPORTING THOSE WHO SUPPORT YOU: THE EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY SERVICE WORKERS' FAMILIES

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submitted to the Faculty of
WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
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the degree of Bachelor of Science

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Abstract

Emergency service workers face many challenges, but their families' experiences are often unknown. The purpose of our project was to raise awareness of the impacts emergency service work has on emergency service workers' families and recommend effective strategies and support systems by interviewing twenty-five families. We discovered that although many families felt pride in their workers, many felt stressed and unsupported. We then made a video using audio from the interviews to tell the families' stories and share our findings.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Emergency Service Workers (ESWs) such as firefighters, police, coast guard, paramedics, ambulance drivers, dispatchers and more, are a critical part of society who sacrifice much to serve others. As a group, they are notoriously prone to exposure to traumatic incidents on a day-to-day basis, and thus the challenges they face have steadily become a rising concern. In fact, 85% of first responders (FRs) display symptoms of mental health issues (Fire and EMS, 2021) while by comparison the estimated global average of adults suffering from mental illness is only 18% (Ritchie, 2018). While the challenges of ESWs are increasingly recognized, those closest to these workers are affected as well, and their experiences often go unseen. Emergency service work can cause families stress in other ways too. Volunteering for emergency services while working a full-time job, although tremendously valuable to society, can stretch a worker's time thin and prevent them from participating in family life, which adds additional stress. That's not to say that emergency service work doesn't have positive impacts— ESWs are good role models bettering their communities and exposing their family members to what a strong commitment to values and work ethic looks like. However, these impacts are similarly not well-understood.

While there are plenty of programs and resources dedicated to helping these workers, few address the importance of having a strong familial network to fall back on, let alone consider how working in emergency services may affect an ESW's relationships and experiences with their family. A study by Beyond Blue (2020) noted that Australians with weak social or familial support networks are five times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts; thus improving ESW family wellness— and therefore helping them support emergency service workers— is critical. When a citizen signs up to be an emergency service worker, paid or volunteer, their family, by extension, is also very often drawn into the strong emergency culture. Despite this, the family's challenges are often faced alone as their challenges are not visible within the culture. They deserve support, but there are few resources targeted toward ESW families and relationships.

The Emergency Services Foundation (ESF), based in Victoria AUS, advocates for and supports ESWs through their strategic partnerships with 14 member organisations in Victoria. ESF supports first responder agencies involving 125,000 ESWs, of which 100,000 are volunteers. Over the years, ESF has researched and recommended programs to support the wellbeing of ESWs in overlooked areas, including improving the process by which volunteers transition to retirement, assessing and providing the best avenues of mental health support for women in emergency services, and helping volunteers understand their value by showing them the impacts of their work. Now, ESF has decided to take their inquiries a step further and investigate the experiences and needs of ESWs' families.

Working with ESF, our project team set out to identify the challenges and benefits that ESW families face by collecting their stories and sharing them through digital storytelling. We interviewed and surveyed ESW's families, gathering anecdotal evidence for use in a digital photo-story with the aim of sharing the experiences and needs of these families. The photo-story was aimed at ESW's informal caretakers and loved ones, ESF's partner organisations, foundations that provide funding for wellbeing programs, and others who will benefit from understanding the experiences of emergency service families. Our project demonstrated that these families not only deserve to be heard but that there are resources and organisations with the potential to provide additional care. We hope that the assets we have created will be widely circulated and will provide ESW families within Australia new ways to understand their experiences by connecting with the stories of other ESW families.

Background

The impacts of emergency service work on the workers themselves can vary greatly. On the positive side, ESWs can experience great satisfaction from their valour and the positive benefits of their work, knowing that they're helping make their community a better place—but on the negative side, such work can be supremely stressful or even traumatising and can put their mental health at risk. Whether they're running into burning buildings or treating victims of car accidents, ESWs do work that is highly visible and often stressful. What is not clear is the secondary impacts this work can have on their families. These families are not in the public eye like the workers and their struggles and successes are not visible. In this chapter, we began by looking into the experiences of the ESWs themselves before diving into the main focus of our work and research, the families. We then examine potential family resources that could be available or adapted by the agencies within the Emergency Services Foundation umbrella. Finally, we look into how to effectively engage an audience in hearing the stories of these families since our goal is to make their experiences more widely known.

Emergency Service Workers' Experiences

Emergency service workers must go towards situations that the rest of us run from. These workers range from volunteers who bring relief to victims of traumatic disasters to police witnessing situations that can drain their emotional resources to EMS personnel who arrive at scenes of graphic accidents. It has been well-researched that experiencing these kinds of events regularly puts workers at elevated risks of facing mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue (Cocker & Joss, 2016). PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is a psychiatric disorder that can be contracted by individuals who have witnessed traumatic events such as violence, a natural disaster, sexual violence, or been threatened with death or injury, to name a few. While some emergency service workers are more likely to be affected by these events than others (e.g., police are more likely to witness violence while firefighters are more likely to witness natural disasters), it is widely agreed that they are at elevated risks of facing traumatic events than the national average. In 2018, a widely circulated study performed by the Ruderman Family Foundation found that police and firefighters within the US were at nearly five times the risk for developing PTSD and depression compared to their civilian counterparts (Heyman, Dill, & Douglass, 2018). Other illnesses such as secondary traumatic stress, cumulative burnout, and compassion fatigue, may be less widely known, but are still pervasive. Secondary traumatic stress (STS) occurs when an individual is not subjected to traumatic events but frequently witnesses the victims or the aftermath,

such as arriving at the scenes of accidents, treating patients who pass away, or reviewing graphic imagery when compiling evidence as part of detective duties (Cocker & Joss, 2016). STS is a more recent discovery and can as of recently be cited as the main cause for a PTSD diagnosis, meaning that someone can now be officially diagnosed with PTSD after repeated interaction with traumatic events or traumatised individuals even if no traumatic events occurred to them directly (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Cumulative burnout is a commonly known phenomenon that occurs when an individual feels their personal mental and/or emotional resources are being drained repeatedly with little rest while compassion fatigue, which is less widely known, is thought to be the combination of both secondary traumatic stress and cumulative burnout.

The effects of compassion fatigue are a reduced capacity to feel empathy for others and increased levels of frustration with their work and it is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Such mental health issues undoubtedly pervade personal relationships and family life.

"Every single day a police officer puts their coat on, they are going out to war. No one understands what the partners really have to go through."

The Impacts of Emergency Service Work on Families

There are many ways that work in emergency services can impact family dynamics. Working in the emergency services can benefit families through exposure to hard work and dedication to strong sets of values and their community. However, sometimes workers are called in at odd or inconvenient hours, or sometimes children feel the need to emulate their parents' values or rebel, or sometimes firefighters are gone for weeks at a time fighting bushfires. The most severe impacts can often come from damage to mental health as a result of their family member's emergency service work. Unsurprisingly, there have been numerous studies on how to combat mental health obstacles that ESWs face and a wide array of research projects on how to support these workers through these challenges. What is surprising is the near-total dearth of research on emergency services families.

While there have been a few studies directly showing that families of ESWs are at higher risks of developing mental health problems than the average Australian family, research in related areas suggests that families of workers in high-risk jobs may have negative experiences when the worker suffers from work related mental health challenges. Children of parents with mental illnesses (regardless of their occupation), are diagnosed with depression and anxiety at higher rates ranging from 25-50%, compared to the

average 10-20% of other children (Worland, Weeks, & Janes, 1987). Mayberry and Reupert (2006) found that when a parent has a mental illness it becomes significantly more difficult for their children to be diagnosed and treated for their mental illnesses. In addition, only 1 in 5 first responders seek and receive adequate help when they have a mental health condition (Rikkers & Lawrence, 2020) so their families (and friends and colleagues) are left to manage any undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues, often without any professional assistance.

Families of workers in high-risk jobs might struggle with a variety of other challenges. Over 75% of police officer spouses, for example, report stress that relates directly to their partners' jobs (Miller 2006). Partners of Australian Vietnam Veterans often reported living in an atmosphere of fear, social isolation, and self-doubt (Westerink, J., & Giarratano, L., 1999). Though veterans and military are not part of the ESWs demographic we are investigating, we can learn from them how stressful work environments affect families. Many ESWs work shifts 12 hours a day, four days a week. Some officers that work for special units can be called away at a moment's notice. Many volunteer ESWs do this work in addition to their regular jobs and claim that their commitment to long and irregular hours is based on the need to provide for their families with a good lifestyle. Although the families might appreciate this, some families depend on and revere stability and predictability; they may find it hard when their loved one cannot be there for them when needed (Miller 2006). As said above, some ESWs deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) partners of ESWs who were interviewed by Westerink and Giarratano (1999), believed that it was their responsibility to "heal" the ESW, and and reported feelings of guilt and helplessness for not being able to help them.

Stereotypical "tough guy/girl" values and attitudes can be pervasive in law enforcement culture with both men and women. This includes behavioural traits like control, dominance, authority, and lack of sentimentality. These traits can strain intimate relationships in families (Miller 2006). The bonds that police officers make with their fellow officers are sometimes stronger than the bond between an officer and their spouse, which can also strain a relationship. They might feel more open to their co-workers because they "understand" their day-to-day tasks more than their spouse. Miller claims that this situation often turns into a cycle where the spouse's resentment further alienates the officer who then spends even more time on the job or away from home. On the other hand, officers might try to create a "protective bubble" around their families to save them from any distressing aspects of their work. Officers may even become paranoid at home and it might lead to distrust within the household (Miller 2006).

Children in families of service members have to experience sudden changes in their life, such as rapid shifts in living arrangements, schedules, parenting practises, and the amount of time spent with their parents (Cozza, S. J., et al, 2010). Older children and adolescents are often caught between feelings of loyalty and pride in their parent's work and anxieties about peer rejection because of common pejorative attitudes toward authority figures. Children of ESWs have the expectation that they are supposed to be "extra good" because one or more of their parents represent some higher authority. Peers might tease them which may cause the kids to show their "bad-boy" side in response (Miller 2006), leading to delinquency.

Overall, emergency service work can present a variety of challenges in family dynamics. Next, we explore potential approaches to support these families.

Resources and organizations for families of ESWs

There are multiple Australia-based resources aimed at dealing with either problems in family dynamics caused by mental health issues and trauma or helping emergency service workers themselves, but there are few that address the impacts on families. Here, we highlight some key approaches that could be relevant. Many support organisations provide information to support people through information, as it allows them to achieve impressive levels of outreach. BeyondBlue is one such Australian organisation that aims to serve any Australian living with mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and put them in touch with the information and resources they need. By providing easily accessible effective support strategies like professional counselling, the organisation has been able to achieve incredible reach: according to their 2019-2020 annual report, they had over 7 million Australian users visit their website, 31,000+ safety campaign completions by users, and an estimated one in three Australians viewed their anxiety informational campaign. However, there are no resources that directly address the difficulties that come with living with a partner or parent with mental health issues. Behind the Seen, is another organization that does provide mental health support for both first responders and their families, and takes it a step further through their focus on workshops and action. Behind the Seen has been designed for all emergency response networks in Australia, supporting both paid workers and volunteer workers. They engage with local and national emergency services communities, lobby for policy changes, and design and implement programs to improve the well-being of emergency services personnel and their families. Behind the Seen runs several workshops that help reduce the stress for the FRs and their families. These workshops range from two hours to full day sessions depending on the level of readiness of the group. They even have a workshop specifically for families of FRs that help the spouses understand the lifestyle and stressors that comes with being a part of an FR's life: how relationships can be challenged, what to do when your partner has witnessed or experienced a traumatic incident, warning signs to be aware of, the importance of open communication, and how to maintain a sense of self, among others. Other workshops can help people living adjacent to FRs reduce related stressors and understand the FRs'

perspectives, although workshops are notably more resource-intensive than informational support strategies.

Some organisations focus largely on promoting core principles that lead to more resilient lifestyles. Fortem AUS is one such organisation that promotes principles to help family activities help manage mental health. Mental fitness to Fortem is trying to train your mind like a muscle in the way that it can help families endure challenges, but also excel, grow, and build resilience in all parts of life. They believe in five ways of well-being which are to connect, be active, keep learning, be mindful, and help others. It provides activities like yoga, walking in the park, learning to play instruments, crafts, coffee catch ups, cooking classes, paddle boarding and many other options. Their clinical support line for FR families provides psychological support and care coordination. The website also provides useful guides for exercise, gratitude practice, building family connection, healthy sleep habits, how to talk about suicide, helping children through trauma and many other critical mental wellness topics. Another organisation that focuses on core tenets is The First Responder Family Wellness Center, an organization that also focuses on supporting FR families through a family-first approach. They have a first responder family online support program that helps families reconnect with their FR and rebuild the bonds between them. This program is delivered live online for an hour a week for six weeks. Their programs focus on three pillars: Family Wellness, Family Connection, and Family Resiliency. Family wellness helps the families learn strategies to manage the exhaustion that can come from ongoing stress and anxiety levels and to improve their sleep. Family Connection helps the family to learn how to improve the relationship with their spouse, so they no longer feel lonely in their marriage or feel like opinionated roommates. They learn ways to communicate with family during stressful times so that they can reduce the fighting that leads to disconnection or how to block out time to spend together as a family, such as weekly family walks (Figure 1) or through other group activities, such as working on art (Figure 2). Lastly, Family Resiliency helps the families learn strategies to keep the family together and work together to manage these unique stressors. The First Responder Family Wellness Center helps them improve their ability to adapt to situations as they arise and learn how to come together as a team.

Figure 1: Fortem's Weekly Walking Group for Family (Fortem, 2021)

Figure 2: Fortem's Children's Paint Night (Fortem, 2021)

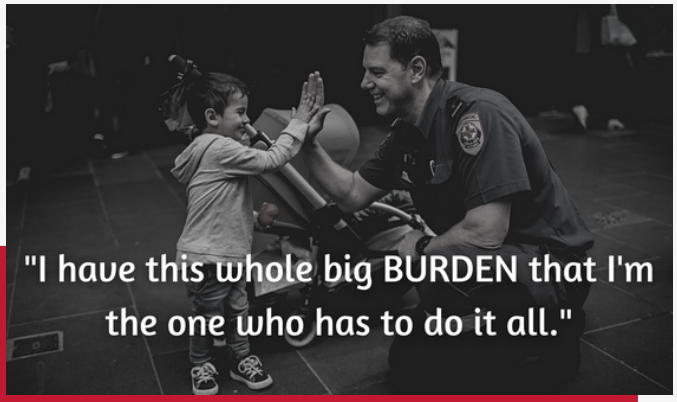
There are also several organisations based outside of Australia that provide unique intervention strategies worthy of study. One such US-based organisation called “First Responder Support Network" has a retreat that is specifically designed for the spouses of ESWs called the Significant Others and Spouses (SOS) Program. The SOS residential program is for emergency responder partners and spouses who have been affected by their loved one’s critical incidents (resulting in secondary or vicarious trauma) but may also be experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety and need a program to address their needs. SOS is a program staffed by experienced mental health clinicians, significant others of ESWs, and chaplains specifically trained in trauma recovery. Families spend 6 six active days at a retreat house in northern California and participate in intensive education, treatment, and self-care modules. The core of the program includes extensive debriefings in a group, individual therapy sessions with specially trained clinicians, and a 90-day plan for follow-up treatment and action steps. The mission of the SOS retreat is to provide a safe and confidential environment for the promotion of healing, education and support. However, taking a break from life for a full week as a couple, potentially across the country or to another one entirely is not very accessible, but more local retreats like this could be an interesting possibility.

Using Storytelling to Create Awareness of Family Dynamics

It is clear that ESW families require and deserve support, and while there are some resources that could be adapted or made available for them, we wanted to hear from them what could be beneficial. By publicly sharing the stories of these families, we can shed light on the importance of their experiences and the support they need. Why are stories the most effective way to share this information? As author Bruno Bettleheim said, “Stories are powerful, palatable, and memorable ways to learn about the world” (Young & Blomfield, 2015). Storytelling is a powerful tool to sway emotion as it contextualises and personalises issues in clear terms. When information is shared in ways that are data-driven but abstract, it is harder to form emotional connections. Anecdotal evidence humanises those who may face challenges putting otherwise hypothetical problems in real-world contexts.

There are plenty of examples in current media today of how storytelling has transformed the way people think about issues or greatly widened the audience concerned with an issue. There are several examples of good digital storytelling that informed how to stitch together anecdotal evidence from the interviews. From StoryCorps, a website dedicated to professional storytelling and its use as a tool to raise awareness, we learned that tactics like music, voice overs and on screen text can provide context and deepen the meaning. We also learned from a video about the Australian bushfires (ESF & Tim Arch Photography, 2021) and a visual piece on public transportation (WPI, 2020), that on screen texts of quotes from people in the community and photos that faded in and out can be moving. A short podcast about a firefighter with a terminal cancer diagnosis taught us that when context cannot be explained through visuals (as some of the videos do), they need to be explained through the audio, in which case the interviewer’s voice can be a powerful tool for narration.

Accessibility, length, and engagement go hand in hand. The pieces we looked at were only 2-3 minutes long and the length of the story is clearly visible when scrolling past it, so the viewer knows if they want to watch or listen it will only take a few moments of their time rather than forcing them to commit to watching something long-form. Overall, the strategies we committed to were using the interviewee’s voices, setting the tone with music, and combining visuals with audio in non-conflicting ways.



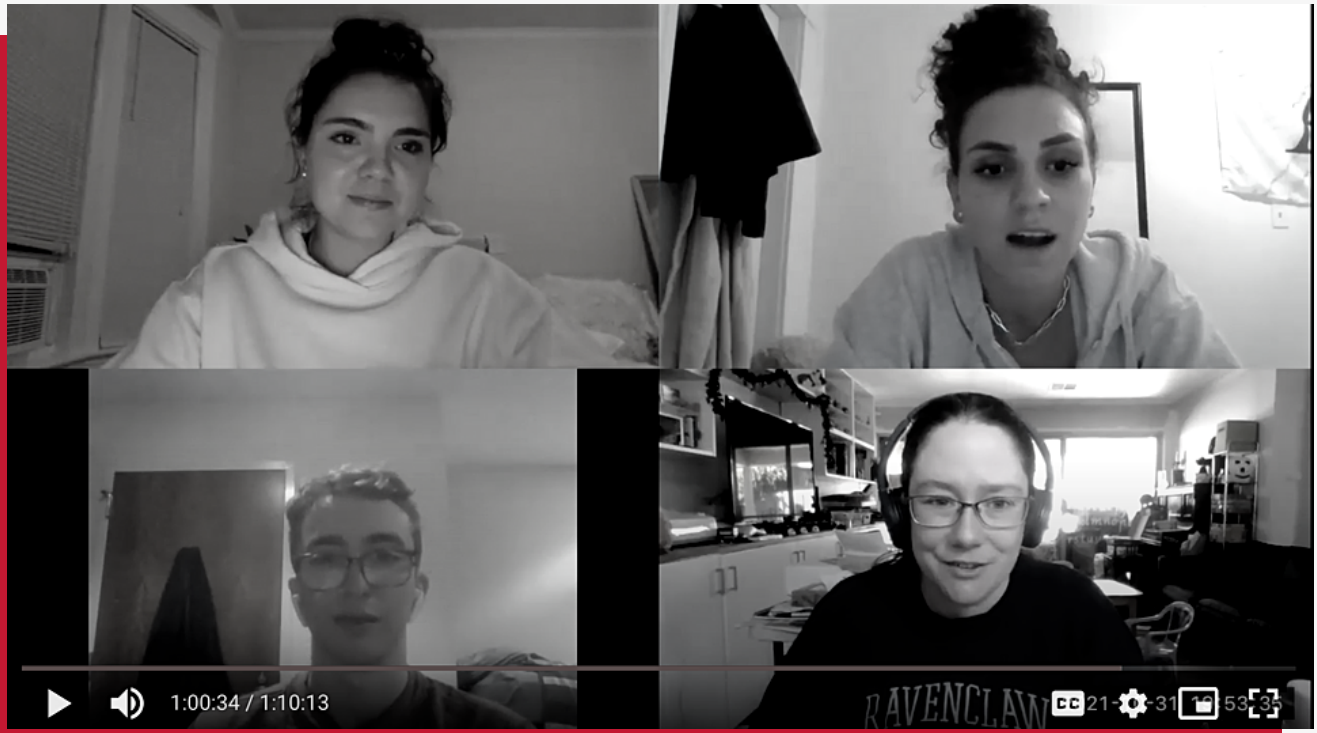
Methods

The purpose of our project was to raise awareness of the impacts emergency service work has on emergency service workers' families and recommend effective strategies and support systems. To this end, our objectives were:

- To understand how work in Victorian emergency services **affects family life** both for the better and for the worse.
- To understand what families of emergency service workers need in order to **feel supported** and to **better support their ESW family member**
- To develop a photostory video that **illustrates the families' perspectives** and **experiences**.
- To **develop** and get feedback on possible **support strategies**.

Interviewing Emergency Service Families and other Key Stakeholders

Our first and second objectives involved gathering information about the experiences and needs of ESW's families in order to understand what they go through and to build context for developing recommendations for families to use in the future. We identified 25 participants to interview through a social media sign-up invitation in partnership with ESF. We also received several emails from interested participants as a result of a survey ESF sent out in late September to all attendees of an ESF-hosted psychological preparedness meeting. The survey gave us a good look into the general feelings of ESWs about both their mental health and the mental health of their families and other informal caregivers. The survey asked about the ways emergency service work had positively and negatively impacted them and their families and asked if they knew anyone they would forward our information to or that we could contact to invite to participate in our project. We interviewed members from **25** families related to ESWs within the Victoria Police, Country Fire Brigade, and State Emergency Services using the semi-structured interview questions shown in Figure 3 (shown on next page).



1. Are you okay with us recording or sharing information from this interview? Specifically, are you okay with us using audio or screenshots of the video recording of this Zoom meeting to be used in the making of a video showcasing the lived experiences of family members of emergency service workers?
2. What organization is your partner/parent/child/sibling affiliated with & what do they do on the job?
3. Is your partner a paid worker or a volunteer?
4. How do you feel about your partner being affiliated with emergency service work?
5. How has your partner's work in the emergency services positively impacted family life or the relationship?
6. Do you believe your partner has ever suffered from mental health issues related to their work?
7. Have you ever struggled with mental health challenges?
8. Have you ever been provided advice or support to help you support your ES family members do their important work?
9. Do you have any stories you'd like to share related to anything we've spoken about today?

Figure 3:Interview Questions for Family Members of ESWs

Producing a Story

Our third objective was to bring the families' experiences to life by creating digital media retellings for the Victorian community and emergency service leaders. While we explored animations and videos initially, the format we pursued was ultimately left open until we began to receive information from families. We chose to create an informational piece with a serious tone, using a combination of emergency service work and family footage overlaid with audio and text taken from interviews. We looked to represent a variety of powerful themes that emerged in terms of positives, negatives, and perspectives on family support. Canva, a graphic design platform, allowed us to produce a video that combined audio clips and text from our interviews with matching music and footage to bring these lived experiences to life. In order to gain footage, we requested photos from all families and asked for their permission to use these photos in this video.

Animations
Serious tone/music
Family footage/photos
Family's voices
Quotes/Text

Providing Recommendations

Our fourth objective was to craft recommendations for changes to existing support systems in ESF's member organisations. We used the information we learned from the interviews. As we created these recommendations, we reviewed them with interviewees to make sure they lined up with what interviewees felt, further refining our recommendations from there. Recommendations gathered in earlier interviews were then tested out in later interviews, asking families if they had agreed with what was said in previous interviews. Once we had interviewed several families, we gathered their recommendations and tested them on our remaining interviews to see if they would agree or disagree with certain methods.

Findings

We analysed the content of our interviews by reading the transcripts carefully and creating a list of common themes that emerged for positive impacts, negative impacts, and types of support they reported they needed. We then sorted through these transcripts and noted the number of times we heard these responses.

We interviewed 25 different family members of ESWs working in the fields Figure 4.

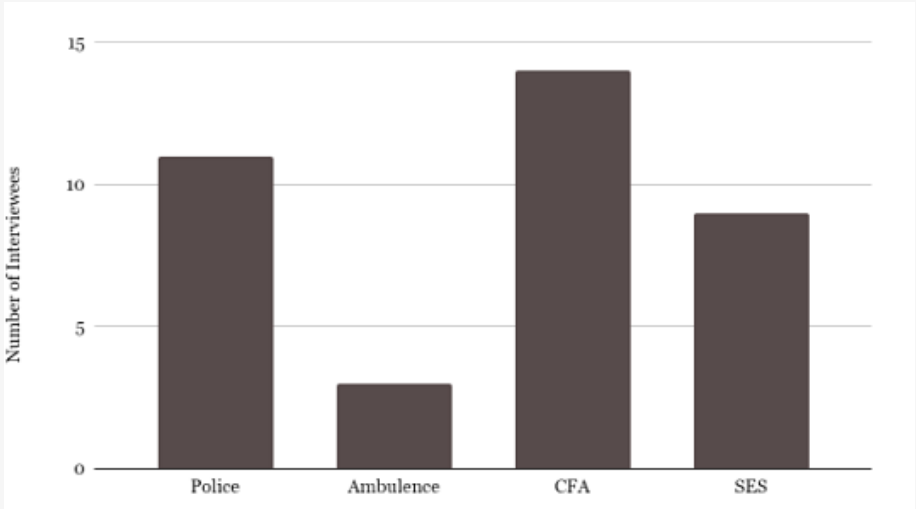


Figure 4: Professions of ESWs in Families Interviewed

Positive Impacts

We discovered that having an ESW in the family can have many positive impacts. Positive themes that emerged appear in Figure 5.

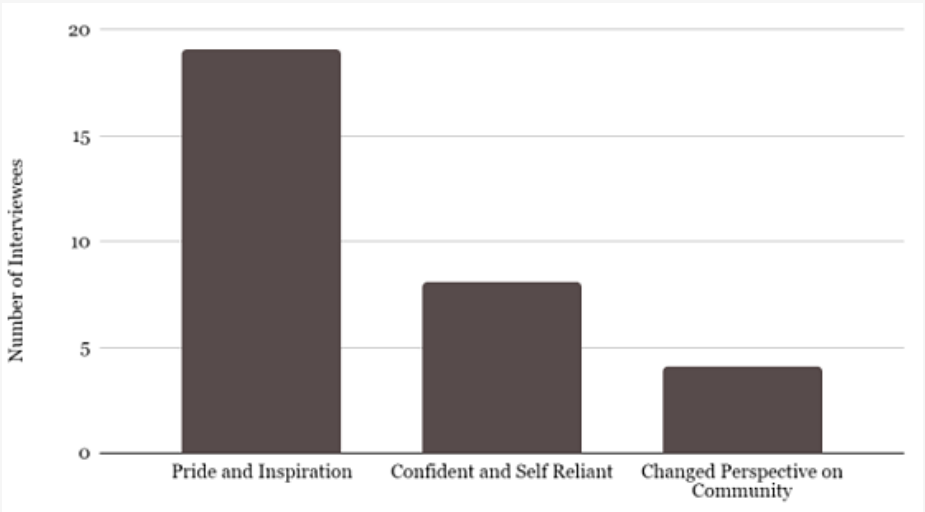


Figure 5: Overarching Positive Impact Themes

Pride and Inspiration

Families experience many positive impacts thanks to having an ESW. Every family member we spoke with expressed a strong sense of pride for their family member's service. Many of these families also reported having a greater appreciation and respect for ESWs and their work as they more fully understand the toll it has on the worker and the family. Our interviewees noted that ESW parents had inspired their children to volunteer in emergency services; the majority of firefighter families we spoke to had either a parent, spouse, or child who also worked in the sector, and some even spoke of generations of families within sectors. One interviewee even said that her grandchildren were fifth generation firefighters. A son of an ESW told us, **"I'm enormously inspired and proud of my old man...you should take pride that someone in your family is strong and brave enough to put their family life on hold to save people they don't know."** Children love their parents for what they do and aspire to be like them, fighting to better their community.

"So much RESPECT for my parents. They put their lives on the line every single day."

Feeling Confident and Capable in Emergency Situations

Family members indicated they had learned many lessons from the ESW in their family: leadership training, resilience, time management, and crisis management skills. Several partners of police officers claimed that they are no longer hesitant to call 000 when they need help and know how to handle stressful situations better because of what their family member has taught them. One interviewee shared a story of a recent trip to the supermarket where a stranger needed medical attention. After assessing the situation, she informed the manager, who was panicking and didn't know how to respond, so she called the police from her cell phone and explained the situation. Since she knew her husband's stories of his time on the job, she knew the procedures and how to handle the situation calmly and effectively, all positive impacts of her husband's work.

"It puts a safety net around us. Having a parents as police officers, has prepared us to get out there and be self-dependent."

Perspectives on Community

"Much better PERSPECTIVE on the world."

Many families interviewed said that the ways they interacted with their community was changed by the ESW's work. Families mentioned that they have met other families through the ESW's social networks, such as Facebook groups for fire brigades. A few families even said that they engage with their community more often or in more meaningful ways as a result of the ESW's work. Several families also mentioned that the ESW's work changed their perspectives on their community and their world by seeing it through a new lens. This included understanding the impacts that natural disasters have on communities, the importance of volunteer work, and understanding the wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds the people within their community come from and the challenges they present. This awareness strengthened their bond with their own and other communities and elevated their understanding of the crises.

"Although at times it seems like they are putting their life on the line, people do appreciate it, you should take pride that someone in your family is strong and brave enough to put their family life on hold to save people they don't know."

Negative Impacts

Although having an ESW in the family can have many positive impacts, we also discovered many negative impacts. The most common negative impacts appear in Figure 6.

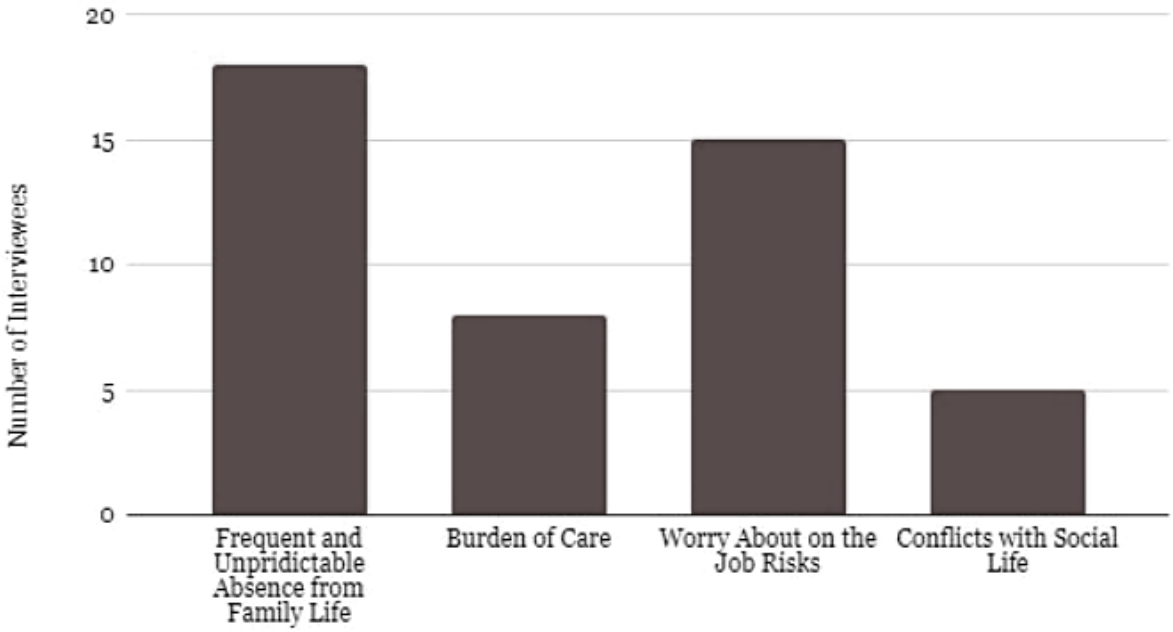


Figure 6: Overarching Negative Impacts

"Didn't sleep for a whole week because I was worried about dad being away."

"When one bad day turns into two bad days and three bad days."

Frequent and Unpredictable Absence from Family Life

No matter the profession, working in the emergency service sector always disrupts schedules and involves some absence from family life. Police officers and EMTs that work with Ambulance Victoria have unpredictable schedules that can vary drastically day to day. Some paramedics operate on a fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) basis as they don't get to pick where they work or where disaster strikes. One interviewee even mentioned that her paramedic husband works FIFO and stays in a separate apartment from his wife and children four days a week as he works. Volunteers for Country Fire Authority (CFA) and State Emergency Services (SES), on the other hand, have no roster but are on call. Families have claimed that a pager was always present in their life. Partners noted frustration when the pager would go off in the middle of dinner or when their partner would have to storm out in a hurry while having people over or at holiday events. An interviewee wrote about their mother in SES, "I remember being frustrated as hell at family functions, Christmas birthdays, any special time that I had driven over an hour to see my mum and she would rush out the door when that pager went off leaving us all there without her. I hated it, I felt like it was more important than we were." Some families depend on the stability that volunteers on call can't always afford to provide. A son of a firefighter said he had to wait for weeks at a time for his father to return full time from fighting bushfires, during which he would only visit home for a few hours every couple of days to sleep. Several interviewees said they wished their partners would stop responding to so many calls or signing up for so many hours because their family was struggling without them but felt guilty about discussing it with the workers because they know the work is important. One interviewee claimed that their partner was working way too much and that it made her own depression and PTSD more prevalent because he wasn't there to support her. Family members noted that their workers separate home and work lives to serious degrees by refusing to speak about their experiences with their families, preferring instead to share their stresses with their co-workers, meaning de-stressing about work was yet another time commitment. Time spent with family can play a big role in how other members can feel in these types of situations.

"I remember being frustrated as hell at family functions, Christmas birthdays, any special time that I had driven over an hour to see my mum and she would rush out the door when that pager went off leaving us all there without her. I hated it, I felt like it was more important than we were."

Burden of Care

ESWs go through a lot of challenging experiences while being on the job. A few interviewees mentioned that their ESWs suffered from physical injuries on the job that understandably required them to go above and beyond in their support, especially as a spouse or parent. Most interviewees mentioned that their ESW suffered stress from their work and that they felt responsible for helping ease the stress, expressing frustration at how difficult it was to try to monitor their partner's moods and handle those responsibilities. Some reported that they sought professional help and were grateful for the guidance they were provided by the sector but still felt lost: One family member said they didn't know how to recognise the signs of PTSD until it was problematic, while another didn't know how to take advantage of support services and so struggled alone. A son of a police officer shared a story of when he was about 6 years old, sitting in the car with his mom, who had PTSD, who was crying and because he wasn't educated on how to help her and how to recognise the signs of PTSD and anxiety. He felt guilty just staring at his crying mother not knowing what to do. A daughter of a police officer claimed that she "couldn't help her" and "couldn't fix her" which made her "feel really guilty and really anxious." A partner of an emergency service worker with PTSD talked about a story of how her 6-year-old daughter dropped a fork in front of her dad. Her immediate reaction was "Sorry dad I'm sorry I didn't mean I'm sorry sorry sorry, dad. Sorry, sorry, sorry." That's not a typical reaction for a little girl, but she had realised that her father can't handle loud noises in the house without reacting— and she had to learn that by living through the experience. Approximately half of the interviewees claimed that their ESW had suffered mental health problems related to their work at some point like stress and PTSD. The few who claimed there were no mental health challenges were also ESWs themselves. They were also far more likely to discuss their problems with each other as they had a higher level of understanding of what their partner or relative was going through. They were also much less likely to be stressed out by their partner's work because they themselves experienced a similar work-life balance.

Worry About on the Job Risks

Many family members said they often feel worried when their partner has to respond to an emergency. When asked to explain the nature of the stress, they mentioned a variety of sources, from frustration at the sudden and unexpected absence interrupting plans to having to suddenly handle the house and children alone to fear for the worker's safety or mental health. A daughter of a police officer claimed she would always worry about her mother going into work because sometimes the police sector was often a harsh environment. She also worried about her mother because she worked in the crime scene sector and would be exposed to a variety of graphic scenes. Calls also often disrupted the sleeping patterns of both the ESW and their partner. The son of a police officer claimed that he once couldn't sleep for a whole week because his father was absent. Family members of CFA workers frequently claimed to worry more during the summer because bush fires would be a lot more aggressive that time of year and the workers were often too busy to answer their cell phones, causing anxiety. One interviewee said that during the summer he couldn't turn on the news because of how much they would editorialise the dangers and severity of the bushfires which caused him to stress out and worry over his father's safety. Many people have expressed how the media makes everything seem worse and makes them worry a lot more. Overall, every family member expressed some type of worry, and they all had their own ways and experiences on how to deal with it.

Conflicts with Social Life

Many police families said that the ESW and the family each experience difficulties connecting with people outside the police sector. They explained that close friends do not understand the life of a police officer or an officer's family. One police officer's spouse is confused as to why some community members don't accept or appreciate her partner's help. With the recent COVID-19 riots in Melbourne, police work may earn them and their families ire from their communities or may make them feel isolated, especially in smaller towns. Families have expressed that it's difficult to create relationships with other people. Nearly every police family member mentioned that they felt their partner had become jaded because of their work and very untrusting of people since joining the police force. Children of police officers have expressed that their social life has been negatively affected due to their parent(s)' involvement in law enforcement. One daughter said, "All of our friends know that our parents are police officers so we might not get included in some sorts of things because you know they'll do things that probably won't be legal...so it puts our social lives in sort of a different way." It can be hard for an emergency service family to live "normally" under various social norms.

Division

One interesting commonality we discovered in our interviews was that there were generally two ways that families noticed their workers dealt with stress. The first is that ESWs would prefer to share their stresses with their partner to get things off their chest and carry the burden together, allowing the family to help care for the ESW. However, this often meant that the ESW would worry about their stresses at home too and put some of the pressure on the family. This was especially common in relationships that consisted of two ESW partners, as they could relate to each other's stresses and understand what each person is going through. The second way was that some ESWs would prefer to not think about stressful things at home and compartmentalise their stress so they can relax when they're off the clock. This would lead to them not wanting to discuss their stresses with their partners and often prefer to discuss them at work or out with their co-workers to maintain this divide and this barrier of intimacy, although this would often make the family feel excluded and worried about the worker's health. One interviewee's partner, who spoke to us off-screen, said that he needs to be able to put his work behind him when he's at home and separating his partner and his home life from his work life is a critical part of that. This practice may be critical for some ESWs, but it can also make the family feel isolated and worried about their partner. According to a couple interviewees, this can also cause families to feel jealous as an ESW may prefer to go out with their co-workers and discuss their stresses at a bar rather than spend time with their families if they are particularly stressed. Overall, there is no right answer when it comes to what level a family and their ESW should communicate about problems, but every answer can come with stresses that may further divide a family.

Families' Needs

Every family's experience is unique, but we found commonalities between families within the same sector of emergency services. One of the most common needs expressed by ESW families overall is that they lack the information about how to deal with the problem noted above e.g., how to communicate with a partner or with kids about the stresses or how or where to get help. While resources with relevant information exist for some of these needs, many new emergency service families are unprepared for the changes that come with living with an ESW — and the resources that do have helpful information aren't always reaching the families.

Police families often lamented the risks to their loved one's mental health. Many interviewees described how their ESW family members suffered from PTSD, depression, and anxiety, and one interviewee even described PTSD as an "inevitability" for police officers. All the police family interviewees commented that mental health resources were improving, especially for younger police who were being taught new emotional coping strategies and were more likely to adopt them, but older generations had not received as much support and were more likely not to discuss their stress with others. Every police officer's family said they wished there were resources for the family. Every interviewee who knew a police member with PTSD said that they not only had to recognise the signs of PTSD alone but had to learn to navigate that space as an informal caregiver alone as well. Doing so was extremely stressful for the interviewees, and every one of them stated that they wished someone had told them what to expect or how to recognise signs of PTSD and how to care for someone with PTSD. Many police-related interviewees mentioned that police families have very difficult lives but are often unrecognised for their efforts, and in one interviewee's experience, was even told to be quiet when trying to discuss another family's struggles with mental health. That interviewee's solution was to create a family publication to share family struggles and successes in the sector through a magazine showcasing their lives, as one already existed for the police themselves. While creating a regularly occurring magazine for a specific sector may raise questions of feasibility, an intermittently publishing magazine or features within existing sector magazines such as police and fire related magazines may serve the same purpose.

Fire and SES families shared similar views on dealing with physical and mental health challenges their workers had suffered on the job. They felt that the largest issues were unpredictable schedules. Most interviewees admitted that there was little that could be done about scheduling and absence, as most hesitated to suggest that the worker volunteer less hours as they didn't want to appear selfish. Some suggested that they wished there was less stigma about workers cutting back hours to be with families. Some plainly stated that the number of hours their ESW volunteered were simply too many; one interviewee said that her husband's hours were having a clear impact on her mental health and worsening her PTSD and depression as she relied on his presence.

Many interviewees said that their stresses and struggles were often invisible, with their hard work and resilience gone unappreciated.

One interviewee recounted a story at a police banquet, where an officer was being toasted for his years of service. His wife was then also toasted for supporting him, and when the interviewee gave a short comment of support saying that people don't understand how hard it can be to marry and support an officer, she was told by the officers to be quiet and was dismissed. That officer ironically proved exactly the point the interviewee was trying to say: the struggles of the families are unknown, and when they are known, they're ignored when compared to ESWs' struggles.

Most interviewees said that communication was the most important aspect in a relationship when it came to managing the physical and mental health of the worker, but many said that the ESW wouldn't communicate well with them about their stresses and wished that they would. If more workers understood the importance of having a strong social support network, perhaps more would communicate with their families and improve wellbeing all around.

Recommendations

The recommendations below were taken directly from or implied by our interviewees and from our background research. The following are the highlights of the families' needs and recommendations based on their needs, refined by our findings and research. These recommendations are directed towards all emergency service sectors.

- **Provide more resource references directed towards families**
- **Educate families on the topics needed to take care of an emergency service worker**
- **Improve the visibility of the successes and struggles that families face**
- **Consider the needs of children**

Provide More Access to Mental Health Information and Resources

To combat the stress that comes with feeling responsible for an ESW's health, many interviewees said they wished they had access to more information, especially in cases where an ESW was dealing with PTSD. Multiple interviewees explicitly described that they wished they had "even just a piece of paper" with information, as they had to learn how to recognise the signs of mental trauma and deal with them through their own research and failures. While resources with this information do exist, this feedback was common enough that it's clear these resources aren't reaching families. Another interviewee suggested an idea to improve mental health care for workers. She said that she knew from her own personal experience that having a psychologist who already knew her was invaluable for her own mental health when her husband began dealing with PTSD because she already had established that relationship. Her suggestion was to encourage ESWs to talk to whatever psychologist is affiliated with their space in the sector once or twice when they join up so that ESWs can establish that relationship and make them more likely to seek out the psychologist's help. While setting up between 100,000 and 200,000 pre-therapy sessions may not be a feasible solution for existing ESWs, it may hold merit for future members, especially within the more stressful positions.

Improve the Visibility of Families

Many interviewees expressed that their struggles are invisible, especially compared to ESWs. One interviewee's recommendation was based off of something she knew the police did, which was having a magazine dedicated to the families and their experiences in order to help highlight their struggles and successes and make families feel less alone. While devoting an entire magazine to the families of ESWs may seem impractical, if it were to release on a monthly, bimonthly, or seasonal schedule and accept volunteer article contribution it could serve as an effective way to raise awareness for these families as well as connect and inform them.

Consider the Needs of Children

Children are too young to fully comprehend what is going on when their parent is having a PTSD attack or an anxiety attack. The stories above in the Burden of Care section show that many children struggle living around parents with PTSD and have a difficult time understanding what is going on inside their parents' minds. The son of a police officer wished there was some sort of way he would have known what to do at six years old trying to help his mother. The mother of two young daughters who spoke about how difficult it was raising kids in a household where their father has PTSD that was mentioned earlier in this report said she searched for child psychologists but couldn't find any. She said that she and her partner managed to find some resources such as books in their own time, but doing so was an added layer of difficulty during an already gruelling challenge for the family. Another interviewee also lamented the lack of resources for children.

Educate the Families

There needs to be a way to expand the ways in which helpful information can reach families, and we can by providing more avenues for educating families on topics. Many families repeatedly said that they wished they had even so much as a brochure on how to look for and recognize the signs of PTSD and how to help someone living with it. Even if the worker may have received support, the families had to learn those lessons on their own. No one would educate the families at home which would make it impossible for the families to understand and learn how to live at home with someone who might have certain triggers. If they were educated on topics such as how to live with a partner with certain triggers then they wouldn't have to learn these things through trial and error, causing needless harm to the family.

Media Assets to Raise Awareness

In addition to this report, we crafted several deliverables such as an informative video including the words and stories of family members and a presentation to ESF members and all of our interviewees and their families.

We created a five-minute video that premiered at our final presentation and which will be posted on ESF's website. In it we created key assertions to summarise the positives and the negatives and used the words and voices of our ESW families, to support these assertions. The video functions similarly to a slideshow, displaying black and white photos of ESWs and their families overlaid with quoted material, as shown in Figure 7. We used actual audio recordings for voiceovers. It ends with a call to action, "So, how can we help families?"

We invited all of our interviewees, their families, our families, and our classmates to join our presentation on Dec. 15th, 2021, 10:00-11:00 AM (AEDT). Fifty-four people attended our presentation where we were able to answer several questions about our project, such as how well our interviewees were familiar with the resources available to them (the answer was that it was close to an even split between those who felt they knew and who didn't, but many of the interviewees who were also ESWs themselves said they knew only through their own sector and not their family/partner's sector) or whether families expressed a desire to get to know the worker's teams and leaders better (we had heard that information around twice offhandedly but it wasn't something we interviewed for). The full recording is available on the ESF website.

Conclusion

Emergency services is a unique sector with paid and volunteer positions that can be rewarding yet challenging. It's common knowledge that ESWs experience stress as a result of their work, but the stresses that their families, friends, and informal caregivers experience are not well-known. The interviews we have conducted have made it clear this needs to change. Supporting or living with an ESW is a unique and profound experience, fraught with as many challenges and benefits as the professions themselves. It's clear that in order to properly support ESWs, we need to support their families.

Through our research and our interviews, we have learned the importance of having a strong social support network and the ways emergency service professions can weaken those networks. We know that families need support and that while many of the services currently available for the worker are helpful, they often don't address the family, and those that do are hard to find.

In this project, we documented these challenges and needs and created a video and organised a podcast to help show the experiences of these families. Using what we learned from our interviews, we created recommended practises that might improve the lives of family members of ESWs and the wellness of ESWs themselves. We hope these materials have informed you about these often-hidden problems and will spur action across sector and individual levels.

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