

**FIRE
EMERGENCY**

NEW ZEALAND

WHANAUNGATANGA PROGRAMME

Addressing organisational factors to improve wellbeing

BACKGROUND

- Research has identified three main factors that contribute to mental ill health in first responders:

**critical
incidents****home
(personal)****organisational
(work)**

- The Whanaungatanga Programme's focus is addressing organisational factors to improve wellbeing.
- It is one of 14 international projects, funded by Movember, aimed at developing evidence-based mental ill health and suicide prevention programmes for veterans and first responders.

THE SURVEY

The Whanaungatanga Wellbeing Survey is a key part of the programme. In March 2023, all Fire and Emergency employees were invited to take part in the first survey. It was designed to:

- measure current levels of employee mental health
- measure organisational factors like perceptions of accountability and support
- look at how these factors impact mental health
- establish a baseline to measure the interventions' effectiveness

The survey was run independently by AUT. It will be repeated in 2024 to measure the programme's progress. Thank you to everyone who took part—we heard from 1,736 employees, including nearly 70% of career firefighters.

WORKING TOGETHER

The programme is funded by Movember and Fire and Emergency New Zealand and delivered in collaboration with the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) and the Fire and Emergency Commanders Association (FECA). We continue to work in partnership to deliver the programme—we all have our part to play to improve things for our people, and a shared accountability to lead what comes next.

The programme is supported by the Rural Professionals Association (RPA) and the Public Service Association (PSA). Auckland University of Technology and the University of Canberra independently evaluate the programme. Researchers from the University of Houston helped to design the survey.

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THE RESULTS

MENTAL HEALTH

Nearly one in three career firefighters meet the criteria for one or more mental ill health indicators.



These include moderate-severe depressive, anxiety and probable Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms.

Communications Centre personnel reported the highest rates of mental ill health, compared with other roles.

Communications Centre personnel and firefighters had the highest rates of probable PTSD and these rates increased with length of service.

The mental ill health rates identified are considerably higher than those found in the population—but comparable with other international research into rates for first responders.

Many employees reported frequent or high consumption of alcohol which can be a maladaptive coping strategy.

What is maladaptive coping?

Using ineffective or unhealthy ways to try and reduce stress or anxiety.

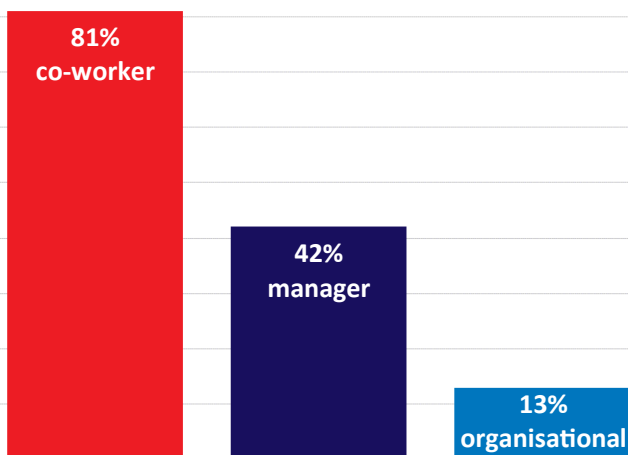
ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS

These include things like, perceptions of support, accountability, competence, psychological safety, how much employees feel involved in decision making. *(continues on the next page)*

THE RESULTS

ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS CONTINUED

Perceptions of support



The survey found that career firefighters had much lower perceptions of support from the organisation than uniformed managers. Positive perceptions of organisational support decreased with the length of service.

EXPOSURE TO POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Communications centre personnel reported the highest rate of exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTE).

Almost all uniformed personnel and more than one-third of non-uniformed personnel reported being exposed to PTEs in the previous 12 months.

The survey found that those with high PTE exposure were significantly more likely to report mental ill health when compared to those with low PTE exposure.

WHILE WE ARE RESILIENT, WE ARE NOT INVINCIBLE

Our people are resilient and cope well with most calls, most of the time.

Certain calls, or dealing with calls, home and work stressors all at once can make it hard to cope.

This programme is looking to reduce or remove work stressors to reduce the risk of these negatively impacting on people's mental health.

CONNECTION BETWEEN POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS AND WELLBEING

Employees who had positive perceptions of organisational support and performance reported:

- more positive wellbeing indicators
- fewer mental ill health indicators

Employees with positive perceptions of organisational accountability and competence also reported increased commitment to the organisation, reduced cynicism and extra-role performance.

CONNECTION BETWEEN POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS AND WELLBEING CONTINUED

This shows a connection between positive perceptions of organisational support and performance and better wellbeing outcomes. Employees who had negative perceptions of organisational factors such as support and accountability reported poorer mental health outcomes. There was also a trend of this increasing with length of service.

The programme's focus is to measure if changes to organisational factors can change people's perceptions of them and reduce mental ill health. The next survey will assess this.

NEXT STEPS

Action is underway to improve things for our people and we all have our part to play. The survey results are being used to come up with organisational change interventions alongside:

- data from workshops with approximately 500 career firefighters and managers in the pilot region (Te Hiku)
- data from interviews/focus groups with Group, District and Region managers in the pilot region (Te Hiku) and a control district (Wellington)



INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

An Intervention Development Team – made up of firefighters and managers in Te Hiku – is taking part in a series of workshops where they will use the data to come up with organisational change interventions.

The interventions will be implemented in the pilot region (Te Hiku) and AUT will measure their effectiveness. At the end of the pilot Fire and Emergency will consider expanding effective initiatives to the rest of the country.

ADDITIONAL WORKSHOPS FOR COMMUNICATIONS CENTRES

Communications Centre personnel reported the highest rates of mental ill health, compared with other roles. Because of this, Fire and Emergency has funded extra intervention development workshops with Communications Centre personnel.

We will repeat the survey in 2024 to measure progress.

We continue to work in partnership with the NZPFU and FECA to deliver the programme.

WELLBEING SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

Speak to your Wellbeing Advisor or scan the QR code:

