

NEWS

NSW Ambulance boss apologises to paramedics it 'completely failed' amid workplace bullying

By Clare Mathie, Ben Millington and Brooke Wylie

Updated Tue 26 Jun 2018, 1:28pm

The head of the NSW Ambulance Service has admitted the organisation has "completely failed" paramedics suffering trauma and mental health problems.

In a pre-recorded video message, the service's Commissioner Dominic Morgan offered paramedics an apology over years of workplace bullying and harassment.

"NSW Ambulance has not always looked after all its staff as well as it should have," he said.

"Some have been terribly let down and some we have completely failed. We all know someone who has fallen through the cracks."

Mr Morgan said no-one he came across believes cultural change is not needed.

"For some, it is near impossible to move on from the hurt," he said.

"For some it will not be possible to fully recover until they are acknowledged and believed for the pain they experienced. For their pain, I am sorry."

Apology is a step in the right direction

Sharon Jenkins, the wife of a paramedic who took his own life in the NSW Hunter region in April, said the apology was an acknowledgement that change was needed now.

Tony Jenkins worked as a paramedic for 30 years and died after being called to a meeting with ambulance management in which he was accused of stealing the drug fentanyl.

"I'm actually feeling very overwhelmed and emotional ... I am actually beside myself," Mrs Jenkins said.

"We feel that the right steps are being taken and the Ambulance [Service] is acknowledging that change needs to happen now.

"That's how I'm feeling. I'm almost in tears."

'Words are cheap': union slams 'paramilitary' culture

Health Services Union national secretary Gerard Hayes said he was "dumbfounded" by the apology.

"There is a paramilitary culture that has to go and there is an open culture that needs to come," Mr Hayes said.

"We've been through a Lower House inquiry, we've had consistent disputes over death and disability insurance, we've had a range of staffing disputes, and all of a sudden all's forgotten and 'I'm sorry' — well that's not what we want to hear. We want to see outcomes."

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PHOTO: Tony Jenkins was allowed to leave his station alone — "they had a chance to stop him," said Mrs Jenkins. (ABC News: Laura Brierley Newton)

Mr Hayes said he doubted the video would end the culture of bullying and harassment.

"I don't think the video is going to make a lot of difference. Words are one thing, actions are something completely different. It's nice that there's been recognition ... but it's not actually an outcome," he said.

"Words are cheap. It's nice that someone says it but we need a strategic outcome."

Paramedics to be offered support to overcome trauma

Mr Morgan said he heard paramedics' firsthand experiences as he met staff when he travelled around NSW two years ago.

He has released a NSW Ambulance Action and Progress report and in it Mr Morgan said he wanted to drive bullying, harassment and discrimination out of the workplace.

"If you still think that it's okay to slam your fist on the table, wave your finger in a colleague's face with menace, or use inappropriate, intimidating or threatening language at work there's no place for you here any more," he said in the report.

He said the report would begin to address the service's shortcomings.

"Ambulance work is tough and it can be life-changing. If we don't have the world's best support systems the pressure and trauma can break people," he said.

"That means that the organisation needs to go much further to care for its staff. To build supports under them. To check in on them and get them help whenever they need it."

The report focuses on mental health and wellbeing support and protection against violence on the job.

As part of its response, the NSW Ambulance Service has appointed a chief psychologist for the first time.

And, five senior psychologists would be recruited to help provide 24-hour immediate support to paramedics in Sydney and regional areas.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said paramedics deserved specialist services.

"In the medical fraternity more broadly, not just in paramedics, there is a culture of high expectation and often that translates into bullying. The psychology services now being offered are just one part of that equation," he said.

The NSW Parliament last year investigated why police officers, paramedics and firefighters are continually being bullied and harassed in the workplace.

The dire situation faced by many emergency workers was highlighted by figures released in 2015, showing one police officer, paramedic or firefighter took their life every six weeks, with experts warning frontline emergency workers were not getting the treatment they need.

Topics: work, community-and-society, occupational-health-and-safety, health, mental-health, suicide, bullying, nsw

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Contact Brooke Wylie

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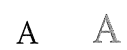
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EXCLUSIVE POLITICS NSW AMBULANCE

'I am sorry': ambulance boss make unprecedented apology, signals new direction

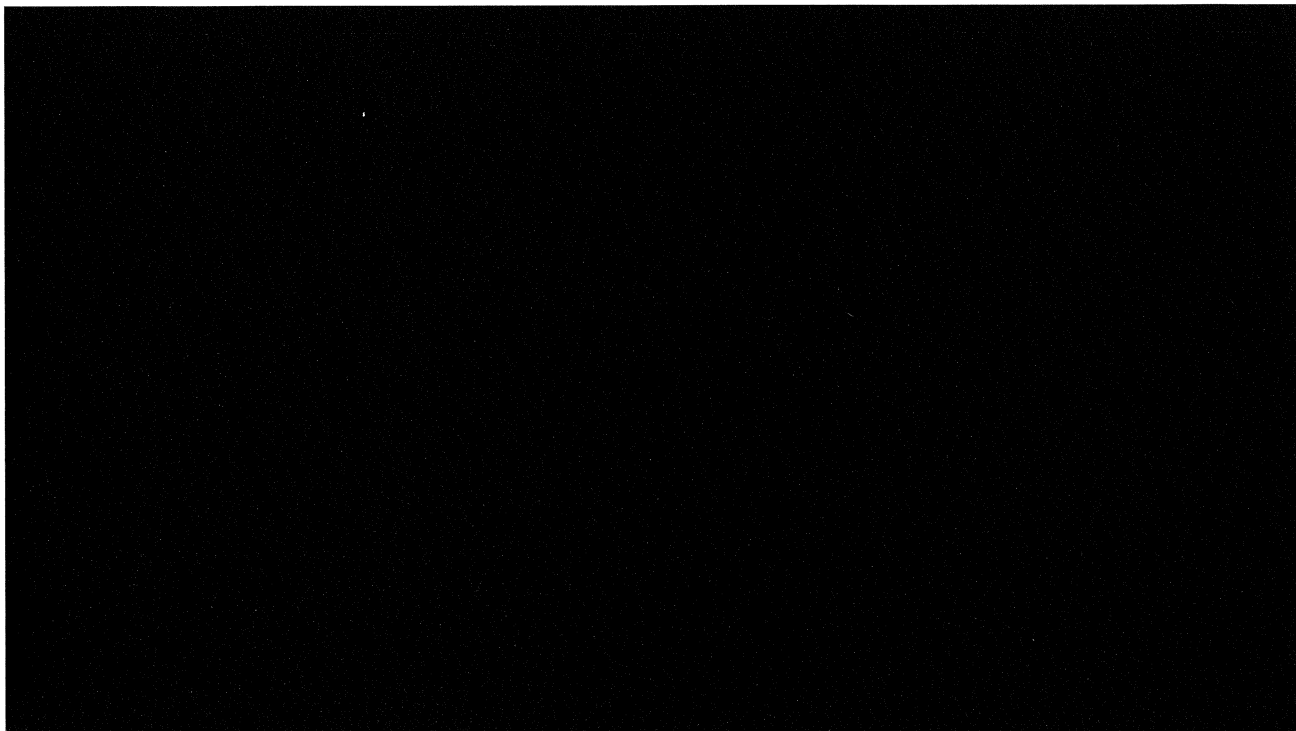
By Kate Aibusson
25 June 2018 – 10:09pm



NSW's chief ambulance officer has made an unprecedented apology to paramedics suffering trauma and mental anguish, acknowledging their employer had failed to protect and support them

all.

In a video sent to paramedics on Tuesday, chief executive Dominic Morgan delivered a powerful mea culpa on behalf of NSW Ambulance (NSWA) acknowledging widespread and underreported bullying, harassment and neglected mental health problems within the service.



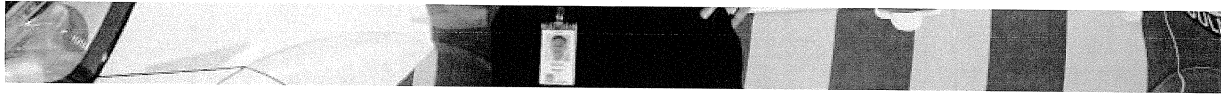
"Some have been terribly let down. Some we have completely failed. We all know someone who has fallen through the cracks."

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Mr Morgan said no one doubted cultural change was necessary.

"But for some, it is near impossible to move on from the hurt," he said.





Chief executive of NSW Ambulance Dominic Morgan has outlined a suite of measures designed to overhaul support services for paramedics.

Photo: Fairfax Media

“For some, it will not be possible to fully recover until they are acknowledged and believed for the pain they experienced. For their pain I am sorry.”

NSW Ambulance had the highest rates of bullying among emergency services, a Public Service Commission survey found.

But as few as 1 per cent of complaints were referred to the organisation’s professional standards unit, a NSW parliamentary inquiry heard in September.

A fear of retribution has stopped paramedics reporting bullying, harassment and intimidation by their colleagues to superiors, several of the first-responders have told Fairfax Media.

In April, a Lake Macquarie paramedic took his own life while he was still in uniform and before he completed his shift.

The 53-year-old husband and father was the third paramedic in the Hunter region to die of suicide in the past decade.

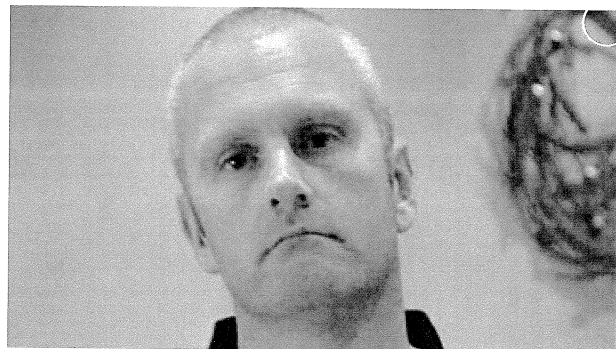
Mr Morgan said rates of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, were likely underestimated.

“Some of these people have been desperately, desperately let down,” Mr Morgan told Fairfax Media.

“I’ve sat across from more [paramedics] than I’d like to, now, where people have told me their story and how it impacted them and you couldn’t not apologise for their experiences.”

These paramedics needed to hear “someone has acknowledged me, someone believed me, and they are genuinely sorry”, he said.

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Paramedics in need of support instead face bullying in NSW Ambulance service

On Tuesday Mr Morgan released a raft of measures aimed at beefing up support services and robust measures to address bullying, harassment, trauma and violence suffered on the job.

For the first time, NSWA will employ a team of psychologists and other specialists for a 24/7 Staff Health Unit.

The unit, headed by a chief psychologist and five senior psychologists, will be immediately deployed to any location across NSW for individual staff or station teams in crisis.

Paramedics can also self-refer to the psychologists bound by their external code of patient confidentiality

“[The psychologists] are only there for one reason, and that is to look after you,” Mr Morgan said to paramedics. “They’re in your corner”.

The unit will manage all other mental health and resilience programs providing support for staff and their families, as well as the chaplaincy program – with an additional 15 chaplains – and peer support officers.

Health coaching and physiotherapy services will also be offered to improve physical health and safety.

A bullying and harassment hotline will allow paramedics to report misconduct and seek support confidentially, bypassing their superiors who may be involved in their grievances and alleviate the fear of retribution, Mr Morgan said.

The Employee Connect service will be an independent and confidential “go-to” point for staff with any workplace issue to cut through red tape, escalate their concerns and respond appropriately, he said.

A new case management database will track complaints and incidents within ambulance stations to identify patterns of misconduct and behavioural issues, offering a warning system for early intervention.

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“This is about acknowledging our failures of the past and walking into the future with some real reforms to support staff right across this organisation,” Mr Morgan said.

Mr Morgan said NSWA needed to send a strong signal to staff that they would be believed and bullying and harassment would not be tolerated.

“I was in the job for 12 weeks before I sacked someone for misconduct,” Mr Morgan said.

“I want paramedics right across the network to feel they have a platform to support them through workplace disputes without fear of reprisal or repercussion,” he said.

But bullies were not made overnight, Mr Morgan said. Early intervention and support for any paramedic in strife was the best strategy to prevent spiralling problematic behaviour.

A leadership program would also give managers the skills to appropriately respond to complaints and misconduct.

The three-point plan was outlined in a 'report-back' document; the culmination of a four-month tour of NSWA stations Mr Morgan undertook in 2015.

The main grievances paramedics raised were a lack of mental health support and violence on the job, he said.

"I want paramedics to know, I've heard them," Mr Morgan said.

The measures to be rolled out over the next 12 months will be funded by \$30 million announced in February by Health Minister Brad Hazzard to enhance health and wellbeing programs for paramedics.

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