

Injury Matters Submission to the

Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety's

Inquiry into Immediate Trauma Support Services in the ACT

- December 2023 -

If you would like to discuss Injury Matters submission or require any additional information, please contact Injury Matters' Recovery Support General Manager, Christine Smith on 6166 7688 or via email at csmith@injurymatters.org.au

Injury Matters congratulates the ACT government on its recognition of the impact that trauma is having on residents and the inquiry into trauma services available in the ACT.

As a not-for-profit organisation, Injury Matters innovates and delivers injury prevention and recovery programs and solutions that empower people, organisations and policymakers across Western Australia (WA) to make informed, safer choices. From road safety to trauma recovery and falls to substance-related harm, we provide vital frontline education and support programs. Moreover, we share equally critical research that enables agencies and policymakers to make informed policy decisions that help mitigate the personal and broader economic impacts and knock-on effects that injuries have in communities across WA.

We welcome the opportunity that this consultation provides to set a benchmark for trauma support services across the country. Outlined below are key responses regarding the questions outlined in the Terms of Reference. Given Injury Matters' expertise in post-crash support, through the Road Trauma Support WA service, the responses provided are in relation to road trauma support activities. As such, the specialist information, support and counselling services provided in what is a sudden, traumatic incident in road trauma, have applicability and transference across other sudden, traumatic events.

1. What immediate supports are offered to people in the ACT following a traumatic incident?

Being located in Western Australia, Injury Matters is not very familiar with support services in the ACT, however we are able to provide context regarding the support service we offer in WA.

Injury Matters, Western Australia's injury prevention and recovery specialists delivers Road Trauma Support WA (RTS WA). Currently in its 10th year of service provision, RTS WA work with individuals, communities and organisations to limit the harm road trauma causes. We are fortunate to deliver this service with funding through the Road Trauma Trust Account and contract management by the State's Road Safety Commission.

Road trauma can affect anyone and affects everybody differently. From people who've caused a crash to those who have witnessed one. From first responders to bereaved relatives and friends. The effects of road trauma ripple through our lives and communities in different ways. As such, RTS WA offers a broad range of support and recovery programs, information, events and online resources. All developed with and for the community. All designed to help individuals and families move forward.

Further, RTS WA recognises that some individuals may benefit from immediate psycho-social supports, while others may require support long after the incident has cleared. The uniqueness of RTS WA is that it allows anyone impacted by a road incident in Western Australia to access service elements regardless of when the incident occurred.

2. What type of immediate supports are needed by people who have experienced a sudden or traumatic incident?

Individuals who have been directly or indirectly impacted by a road incident may experience trauma due to the physical and mental injuries obtained, and therefore require support following the incident and at varied touch points.

In the ACT in 2022 18 people died¹ and in 2021 740 people were hospitalised due to a road traffic incident.² However, due to the prevalence of non-fatal incidents and the psychological impact of a road traffic incident on survivors and their broader community, the impact of a road traffic crash is even larger than these figures.^{3,4}

It has been estimated globally that over 15% of road traffic crash survivors suffer from an acute stress disorder⁵ and in Australia, it has been reported that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was prevalent in 21-29% of road traffic crash survivors.⁶

Additional common psychological disorders following a road traffic crash include; depression, grief, loss, driving phobias and other anxiety disorders.⁷

There are a number of factors that can influence the likelihood of an individual experiencing a psychological issue after a crash, including; previous or existing mental health condition⁶, personal fault in the incident⁸, perceived threat to life during the crash⁶, physical injury severity^{6,9}, involvement in the compensation process^{5,9}, expectations regarding returning to work¹⁰ and support received.⁶

The prevalence of psychological conditions following a road traffic crash can influence the individual's quality of life, social engagements, financial independence and long-term health outcomes.⁷

Despite these potential long-term implications, mental health consequences are often overlooked in comparison to physical health rehabilitation⁶ and therefore additional services are needed to provide timeline access to support following the traumatic incident.

The Final Report from the Joint Select Committee on Road Safety in 2022 highlighted a number of recommendations regarding reducing the impact of road crashes and fatal injuries. A key recommendation of relevance to this Inquiry is the need to improve and deliver national consistency in post-crash response and care.¹¹ By building the capacity of trauma services, increasing the availability of mental health support, and improving the quality and timeliness of post-crash responses in regional, rural and remote areas, it will help to provide improved support for people who have experienced a sudden or traumatic incident.

Road traffic incidents and other traumatic incidents occur suddenly and therefore it is vital that individuals are provided with holistic support to enable them to work through the incident.

3. At what point do Victim and Coronial Support services engage in the process following a traumatic incident?

In Western Australia (WA) the Victim Support Service is a voluntary and free service available to victims of crime. Following a traumatic incident, individuals can contact the Service to access support via; counselling, legal services, medical services, support accessing information regarding police investigations and the criminal justice system.¹²

The Victim Support Service provide some inhouse services following a traumatic incident, whilst for other services they offer referrals to other agencies that can provide different types of assistance.¹² The Victim Support Unit's reparative pre-sentence mediation can be initiated after the plea of guilt has been entered, whilst the Unit's protective conditions process occurs post-sentence.¹²

Coronial Counselling Services in WA are provided through the Coroner's Court of WA, who is responsible in investigating certain types of deaths to determine the cause and manner of death and to consider ways that similar deaths may be prevented in the future.¹³ The Coroner's Court of Western Australia understands the impact coronial investigations may have on family and friends. The Coronial Counselling Service assists people in this situation which can help by providing information on the coronial process and making referrals to external counselling and support agencies who can assist with issues surrounding grief and loss.

RTS WA is a referral pathway for both Victim Support Services and Coronial Support Services where the individual was involved in a road incident.

In the instance of road trauma, the Insurance Commission of WA (ICWA) provides motor vehicle injury insurance for vehicles registered in WA including Compulsory Third Party and Catastrophic Injuries Support.¹⁴ RTS WA is able to seek compensation for allied health services provided to an individual who has a claim through ICWA. RTS WA also becomes a free service pathway where claimants are not eligible for ICWA insurance coverage.

4. What challenges/role do ACT Police and Emergency Service members face at the scene of an accident or a traumatic event to support affected community members or family members or witnesses?

Due to the preventable and predictable nature of road traffic crashes and other traumatic incidents, Injury Matters suggests the removal of the word accident. The term accident implies that the incident happened without reason or human intervention, which is not the case for the majority of incidents.

At the scene of a traumatic event, Emergency Service members are faced with a unique situation every time, in which they are required to respond in a controlled matter to stabilise the incident, provide immediate first aid and mitigate any additional trauma from occurring. This alone can be challenging however in regional locations emergency services members are more likely to know the individuals involved in the incident, resulting in an additional level of complexity.

When responding to an incident, Emergency Service member's primary responsibility is to increase the safety outcomes of everyone involved. However due to the significant nature of some traumatic incidents, media personnel can arrive at the scene to obtain footage and information about the incident. This can prove to be a physical and mental barrier for Emergency Service members to complete their role successfully.

Access to additional services would significantly help Emergency Service members at the scene of a traumatic event. Not only would it ensure that they are able to access specialised support at the scene of the event, but it would also prove valuable in referring those impacted to specialised support.

In WA our Police, Ambulance and Fire Services are a significant referrer of clients into RTS WA. Feedback from Emergency Services, particularly Police has found the free, specialised road trauma service to be a supportive offering to individuals and families following a sudden, traumatic event such as a road crash.

Even the most resilient of Emergency Service personnel, both career and volunteer, can be impacted by the pressures related to their work, particularly when supporting families and communities experiencing road trauma. Our [After Road Trauma Wallet Cards](#) have proven a helpful resource to assist in providing post-crash care for their community by encouraging people to seek further help through the supports available through RTS WA.

Emergency service members are more likely to witness or be involved in multiple road traffic incidents than the general population.¹⁵ As a result, it is important that extra care is taken to monitor the cumulative effect of road trauma, vicarious trauma and prevent burnout within emergency service members.

5. What immediate trauma support services are available to ACT Police and Emergency Service members who may witness or experience a traumatic incident?

Anyone who witnesses or is involved in a road traffic incident across Australia can access [Road Trauma Support WA](#) and [Amber Community Victoria's](#) free online information and resources. These online tools provide timely support to individuals experiencing road trauma and guidance for family members, friends or colleagues who may be looking for guidance in supporting an individual experiencing road trauma. All of which is evidence-informed and non-judgemental.

For RTS WA, as the service eligibility is for anyone impacted by road trauma in WA, this includes anyone who's work exposes them to road trauma, such as Emergency Service personnel are eligible to access all elements of the service, including counselling services as an alternative to their Employee Assistance Program.

6. What is best-practice, evidence based, 'trauma informed' immediate trauma support service response to community members, witnesses, family members etc who may be involved in a traumatic incident?

Mental health care following road trauma:

Despite the fact that the majority of individuals will recover from a road traffic crash, some will experience mental health problems which require treatment to prevent the development of long-term psychiatric disorders and/or chronic pain.⁷

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies mental health care and psychological support as key components of the post-crash response due to its role in mitigating grief, anxiety and other bereavement reactions, and in preventing psychological distress becoming a disability that interferes with re-integration into work and social life.³

In order to improve resilience and reduce the risk of elevated distress developing into severe psychological disorders, preventative measures are required soon after the road traffic crash.^{9,16}

RTS WA's recommended approach is guided by best-practice through the provision of psychological first aid as an immediate support to road trauma. This approach is flexible and practical and helps to reduce initial distress, offers coping mechanisms in the days and weeks following the traumatic incident and reduces the risk of retraumatizing and further harm.¹⁷

When mental health care is commenced months or years after the road traffic crash, there is an increased risk of psychological distress developing into psychological disorders, such as PTSD.¹⁸ Additionally, leaving psychological distress untreated can require lengthy and expensive treatment interventions when treatment is sought.^{6,7,9}

The overall health and economic costs associated with a road traffic incident are greater when those impacted experience psychological distress¹⁹, further reinforcing the importance of timely post-crash mental health care.

Despite the evidence of the impact of road trauma and the effectiveness of preventive efforts, the majority of road traffic victims do not seek help soon after their crash.²⁰ This can be attributed to victims not understanding the impact of the incident or being aware of the support that is available to them and therefore not seeking help until several years after the incident when their mental health condition has become chronic.²⁰

Supporting people impacted by road trauma:

There is no 'timeline' for when people can experience psychological conditions after a road traffic incident. People impacted by road trauma report improvements in their mental health three months after the incident and others can experience late onset psychiatric outcomes.⁴ Therefore, it is vital that individuals experiencing road trauma are supported no matter what time period has passed since the road traffic incident occurred.

A number of people can be affected by a single road traffic incident, including; individuals directly involved in the incident, witnesses, emergency service workers, family members, friends, colleagues and the wider community²¹, which is why support should be offered to anyone affected by a road traffic incident, inclusive of the culpable party.

After a road traffic incident, people often find the most important things for recovery are time, understanding, and support from family and friends. However, if an individual is experiencing ongoing or distressing symptoms which are interfering with their usual life, particularly 4-6 weeks post the incident, professional support is recommended.

In an effort to reduce the impacts of vicarious trauma, particularly for those individuals where their work exposes them to road trauma, psycho-educational training such as Psychological or Mental Health First Aid is recommended to help provide calm to stress reactions and connect people with necessary supports and resources. It also helps to build the capacity of the workforce to recognise early signs and symptoms of stress reactions in themselves and coping mechanisms to support themselves.

Evidence based model:

Delivered by Injury Matters, [Road Trauma Support WA](#) offers varied levels of specialist support to individuals and communities following a road incident. Following formative research and the guidance of a specialist steering committee, Injury Matters was funded by the WA Road Safety Council in 2012 to develop and deliver a sustainable road trauma support service in WA.

Over the last ten years Road Trauma Support WA has been helping anyone affected by road trauma improve their wellbeing, recover their mental health and move forward with their life. Developed with and for the community, a broad range of support and recovery activities are conducted for anyone impacted by a road traffic incident in WA. Key service elements include;

- **Free, personalised counselling:** Confidential, non-judgemental support from specialist counsellors, delivered in person in Perth or via phone or video call. No referral required. No timeframe or session limits apply.
- **Information and resources:** A diverse range of in-person and online information, resources and support services for individuals and organisations.
- **Education and training:** From online or in-person educational workshops for people, communities and organisations affected by road trauma.

Road Trauma Support WA uses a public health approach to respond to a complex road trauma, and mental health and wellbeing issue. While the primary target audience is anyone impacted by road trauma, the elements of service delivery are pragmatic to allow for a balance in provision of service and allowing for a tiered approach to service support options based on individual level of identified need. As such the service relies on strong referral pathways and well-established relationships with those organisations and services most likely to be working with road trauma. This predominantly includes WA Police, St John Ambulance, Department of Fire and Emergency, State Trauma Hospitals and crisis support services.

The trauma-informed approach across the service elements allows for flexibility to adapt to the needs presented by the diverse stakeholders. Psychoeducation is a key activity across the service to increase awareness and knowledge of the impacts of road trauma.

During the 2022/23 financial year alone, Road Trauma Support WA responded to over 350 inquiries for road trauma information, resources or counselling support, provided 639 counselling

and support instances, distributed 56,948 resources, visited 15 regional towns in WA, and facilitated 14 presentations and workshops across metropolitan and regional WA.

Despite being developed for local needs, the constructs of Road Trauma Support WA could be expanded to include other locations within Australia.

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