

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 7 June 2023

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell



**WITNESSES**

Mr Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Police,

Ms Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Mr Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Police, Racing, Victims and Coordination, Department of Justice and Community Safety; and

Ms Susan Middleditch, Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Regulatory Services, and

Mr Shane Patton, Chief Commissioner, Victoria Police.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Police the Honourable Anthony Carbines and officers from the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Minister, I am going to invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement or presentation. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Visual presentation.**

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks very much, Chair and committee members. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here today and start with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and also pay my respects to any First Nations people in the room today.

Since coming to government, we have made record investments of course of more than \$4.5 billion in Victoria Police to ensure they have the resources, the powers and the technology they need to keep the community safe. Our government is delivering on our election commitment to invest \$4 million to embed and expand BlueHub. BlueHub of course is the program that ensures police have access to independent and timely mental health treatment, delivered by clinicians with expertise in treating trauma and who are familiar with the working culture of police. That investment includes the government's record of investing in the mental health and wellbeing of police officers more generally.

We have made sure that Victoria Police can continue to test 150,000 motorists each year as part of our roadside drug testing program through our investment of over \$25 million, reducing the number of drivers under the influence of drugs on our roads.

We are investing \$1.3 million as part of our flood recovery to replace Rochester police station, which was damaged in the catastrophic Victorian floods late last year. That will ensure that the hardworking local police have access to the modern police facilities they need to keep the local community of Rocky safe.

\$12.37 million is also being invested to ensure Victoria Police can continue to prioritise early intervention initiatives to reduce future justice system demand. We know that for many individuals their first contact with

the justice system is through an interaction with police, and Victoria Police has a critical role to play in many aspects of the criminal justice system. It is an investment that will enable Victoria Police to expand its highly successful embedded youth outreach program to Brimbank, Melton and Shepparton and enhance its Aboriginal youth cautioning program.

Another \$8.6 million is being allocated to Victoria Police as part of the family violence legal assistance at court initiative to provide specialist police prosecutors at specialist family violence courts.

The government is also continuing to invest in a range of initiatives and programs to combat the ongoing threat of violent extremism, with \$3.52 million allocated to continue the government's strong focus on recognising and preventing extremism in Victoria.

We know that investing in police is an essential part of building a safer and stronger Victorian community. That is why we have invested in all aspects of Victoria Police, with additional police officers, improved infrastructure, new equipment and technology. And some of the critical components delivered as part of this investment do include \$2 billion in 2017–18, which formed part of the biggest ever investment in law and order in our state's history. This investment funded the recruitment and deployment of 2729 additional frontline police, including 415 specialist family violence officers, which is the single biggest uplift in police numbers in our state's history.

We have delivered additional police prosecutors to hold offenders to account and established a provisional payment scheme for emergency workers and funded a pilot of the embedded youth outreach program.

The 2022–23 budget also provided \$623 million to include in funding for a further 502 new police and 50 protective services officers and provide funding for the rollout of additional non-lethal options to resolve dangerous situations.

Finally, the current budget is investing \$60.1 million to supplement the mental health and wellbeing of our police officers and continue to strengthen community safety, and the government has invested year after year to ensure that Victoria Police continues to be a world-class police service.

To deliver on the \$342 million commitment in last year's budget to recruit additional police and PSOs, Victoria Police commenced a new police recruitment campaign on 16 October last year called Made for More. The campaign aims to raise awareness of the diversity of roles across the organisation and increase applications from a range of backgrounds. I am pleased to advise that police application numbers between January and March this year have increased more than 85 per cent in comparison to the same period last year. Delivery of the 251 police and 25 PSOs to acquit our 2022–23 commitment is on track for this financial year. 185 Victorian police have been sworn in by the end of May and all remaining positions have been recruited and inducted at the police academy. In fact Victoria Police is on track to deliver all 502 police officers and 50 PSOs in September 2023, approximately nine months earlier than expected.

Since 2014 the Victorian government has also invested more than \$1 billion to replace, refurbish and build new police infrastructure, of which \$423 million has been invested to build new and refurbish existing police stations across the state, including Warrnambool, Moe, Cowes, Reservoir, Werribee and Wyndham. This investment has provided our hardworking police officers with the modern and fit-for-purpose facilities that they need.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks very much, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. The first 7 minutes of questions goes to Mr McGowan and starts now.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister. Chief Commissioner, page 263 of budget paper 3, in the output line item for policing and community safety, have you on any occasion over the past year asked the minister for more assistance from the government to help solve the shortage of operational members, which is clearly at a crisis point and cannot continue, and what was the response you received to any requests?

**Shane PATTON:** Sorry, the question was: have I asked for extra resources in the last year?

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Yes, at any point in the last – that is right.

**Shane PATTON:** No, I have not. And you used the word ‘crisis’, and I would not agree with that – respectfully so, though, I would add. In 2016 we received funding and since then have had 3135 extra police funded and brought into the organisation, which was fantastic during COVID because it allowed us to be flexible in our response and do all those large things we needed to do on the borders and the protests and everything we had. Since then we have been funded for an extra 502 police officers and 50 PSOs, which, as the minister outlined, we are on target to achieve as well.

When you described in your words before a ‘crisis’, there is no doubt we certainly are under attrition from what we previously have been. The simple reality was no-one retired or left during COVID because there was nowhere to go, so we had a significant number of retirements mid last year and everything with the lifting of the COVID restrictions, when people could travel. So we have a large, I think there was – I will get you the exact number, sorry – 807 are under attrition at the moment, which have not yet been replaced.

But as the minister outlined, we have had a very successful Made for More recruiting campaign. Since 10 April we have started – prior to that we only had single squads, where we only had 24 members being pulled in each fortnight, or 24 recruits. Now, since 10 April we have been filling those recruit squads at 48, two double squads, per fortnight. And we have those, if you like, in place ready for the next six weeks, eight weeks, where we have got the 48.

When you take all those things into account, would I like the under attrition to be filled? Absolutely. But the academy is full. I think it has got 466 people in there at the moment. We have 1800 people in the pipeline for recruits, and we are funded for that extra 502. As soon as we get through that 502, we will obviously be trying to catch up, and along the way, the way it is going, I think we will be starting to, for lack of a more eloquent word, chew into that 800-odd under attrition in a very short period of time.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I suppose the logical follow-up question, then, given that we retained more officers than we projected because of COVID and, as you say, we have now got significant numbers in the pipeline, at some point in the past it seems to me that perhaps we were not actually appropriately managing or foreseeing the needs going forward.

**Shane PATTON:** Again, sorry, I am not wanting to be seen as obstructionist but, no, I would not agree with that. The reality is the COVID, if you like, tsunami of retirement for us that happened there – some people obviously made lifestyle choices as well at the finish of COVID to exit – but we have since 2016 been managing very well the, if you like, numbers coming in and also the allocation of them through the staff allocation model. I do not see how we could have done any more, because had we seen, if you like, an orderly transition during the COVID years – and the intakes were very limited during that period of time as well. It was very complex getting people to come into the academy as well for recruitment over those heavy two years. I think from recollection it was 16 March 2020 when we first had restrictions come in, and that really flowed for the next couple of years. That impacted our training and our recruitment substantially. You had a perfect storm. I hate using COVID as an excuse, because it seems to be the excuse for everything nowadays, but to put it in context, that slowed up our recruitment a lot.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I suppose the obvious question then from the extension of that is: at what point do you think you will achieve the government’s objectives in terms of the number of police officers?

**Shane PATTON:** We will achieve the 502 and the 50 within the two-year period, as was the government commitment. There is no doubt about that, and we will be over on that as well. How far we will have dug into the attrition I cannot say at this stage, but we will certainly be making inroads into that as well.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you, Commissioner. Minister, how much of the policing and community safety expenditure forecast in the coming financial year includes new initiatives to address the shortage in police numbers?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, there are a couple of references. The earlier one that you mentioned on page 263, ‘Community Crime Prevention’, has over \$13 million, which is ongoing funding for those programs. Where you went to the reference earlier, where you see there is a reduction, that is actually concluded projects. For example, where we had capital works like bollards across the City of Melbourne and the like, when those

projects were concluded and the bollards were in, the funding concluded. For all of the non-lapsing programs on page 263 that you went to, the funding continues for those, and there is over \$13 million that is in the budget this year.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Sorry, Minister, that is for bollards; I was talking about police officers, though. Perhaps you did not hear the question.

**Anthony CARBINES:** No. Earlier you were saying we have reductions on page 263. They are concluded programs; it is not because there has been any reduction.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question is specifically about police numbers.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, sure. In our police numbers we have funded 3600 additional police.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** This year – 2023–24. The specific question is: where is the money for additional numbers in 2023–24?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, the funding for those positions is the 251 police and the 25 PSOs that were funded for recruitment in 2022–23, and they will be sworn in by 30 June this year.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question remains: is there any funding in 2023–24 for additional police over and above attrition?

**Anthony CARBINES:** The funding was provided in previous budgets for the 50 PSOs and the 502 additional police. That is part of the investment that we have made since we came to office in the 3600 additional funded police positions that the police are currently recruiting to.

**The CHAIR:** I will stop you there, Minister. Mr McGowan, your time has expired. We will be going to Mr Galea for the next 7 minutes.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister, Chief Commissioner and officials. Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 86. You also mentioned this in your presentation, but could you please expand on what the BlueHub mental health project is and how this investment in the budget will support Victoria's police officers and improve their mental wellbeing?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks for that question. The Victorian government supports our police officers. That is why we have made a record investment to deliver a modern, innovative and world-class Victoria Police service to keep members of the community safe. As a government we understand that policing is a rewarding, challenging and often confronting career and that police also see people at their most vulnerable, routinely responding to incidents that most of us never want to see. We know that has long-lasting and often hidden impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of our Victoria Police, and that is why it is essential that we make sure our police officers have access to appropriate support, which can only happen through our continued investment.

In this year's state budget we are investing \$4 million over the next four years to continue the vital work of the BlueHub initiative. The BlueHub initiative has been developed in partnership with Phoenix Australia and the police association, and I commend them for their activism in this space. It is a nation-leading specialist program. BlueHub provides police officers with a dedicated pathway to access independent and timely treatments delivered by clinicians who understand the unique needs of police and who deliver faster, confidential, standalone and easier access to mental health supports. BlueHub aims to increase members' confidence to seek treatment. BlueHub clinicians develop flexible treatment plans tailored to the individual needs of the presenting police officers. Those individual plans are developed and refined in response to the assessments of the problems individuals present with at their initial planning sessions and ongoing assessments. BlueHub commenced as a three-year pilot program in 2020 and was formally launched in July 2021. The \$4 million investment in this year's budget will enable the initiative to hire additional staff to ensure the program can be embedded as a service model and expanded to provide services to more police officers.

The *Beyond Blue Answering the Call National Survey*, conducted in 2018, found that police and emergency services sector employees had much higher rates of psychological distress and were more likely to experience post-traumatic stress compared to the wider community. Coupled with poor mental health literacy and also

concerns regarding potential stigma associated with seeking assistance, these unique stresses of being frontline police and keeping our community safe have made it difficult for police and emergency workers to obtain the assistance they need. It is why programs like BlueHub, which is specifically designed to address the needs of our police officers, are really critically important.

As of 31 March 2023 there were approximately 155 Victoria Police members engaged in the program and 84 members had completed their treatment. Early data also indicates that police members who commence treatment via BlueHub are more likely to complete their treatment program, with only approximately 1 per cent of participants failing to complete the program. That compares to approximately 44 per cent of members who accessed treatment via an alternative provider.

One important part of the success of the program is Phoenix Australia's commitment to providing their clinicians with tailored training and ongoing support. That support ensures that clinicians continue to provide best practice methods for assessment and treatment of trauma and are familiar with police culture and treatment and treating police and PSO members. The funding builds on our government's record of supporting Victoria Police programs where there is a focus on mental health early intervention and prevention over many budgets, because our government supports our police. The \$4 million BlueHub initiative is further testament to that commitment.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. Minister, can you further detail what other mental health initiatives and investments the government is making to improve mental health outcomes for police officers?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Sure. Thank you. In my travels across Victoria's police stations I am often told stories about the real-life pressures faced by police on the front line. Whether it is responding to road trauma accidents or family violence incidents, our police look to make decisions in very challenging situations. The police I have met tell me that it is a privilege to be the one that makes the tough decisions to keep the community safe, and I would like to take a moment to thank them for the work that they do; it is very much appreciated. We also know that it is essential that our police officers have access to the early intervention and prevention support services that they need.

The government is proud of our record of investing over consecutive budgets now in the mental health and wellbeing of our police and emergency service workers. In July 2020 we established the Early Intervention and Prevention Fund to promote initiatives focused on mental health and early intervention and prevention. That program aims to increase awareness and improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes for police officers. Since its inception the program has introduced a number of initiatives, which include reflective practice supervision for both groups and individuals, expanding the Victoria Police injury management team and continuing the trauma recovery and resilience group.

The reflective practice initiative, which is often delivered in a group setting, is designed to increase the resilience of police. Reflective practice is one kind of intervention program developed, with the participants overwhelmingly finding that the practice of validating their experiences and normalising the psychological impact of policing on individuals can increase an individual's ability to recognise the signs of psychological injury. Participants also reported increased confidence and skills in managing stress.

The second initiative of the EIPF is the trauma recovery resilience group, and that group is a 15-week program for people experiencing mild to moderate work-related trauma. Recent evaluations of that program found that the group participation resulted in significant reductions in key symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

We have also established the Centre of Excellence in Emergency Worker Mental Health and a specialist network of clinicians to improve mental health outcomes for our emergency workers, our first responders. The centre is a dedicated facility supporting clinicians to deliver evidence-based treatments for police and emergency service workers, including retired workers. It aims to build that awareness and capability of practitioners to respond to the unique mental health needs of our first responders. The SNC comprises a team of mental health clinicians who provide evidence-based, culturally competent treatment to emergency workers, particularly those experiencing mental health injuries as a result of their work. Our government is really proud of the record of our investing in the mental health wellbeing of our police and emergency service workers, and we understand that that goes to the ongoing safety of the community if we look after our workforce. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The time has expired. We will go on to Mr O'Brien for the next 7 minutes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and team. Chief Commissioner, do you believe the best outcome for mental health patients is a police response or a health response, and do you support the government changing the legislation for police to continue to respond?

**Shane PATTON:** The best response, as found by the royal commission, was a health response, and Victoria Police will continue to do what we can and work with the relevant committees to make sure that that is put in place as soon as that is legally available to us to be involved in it.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Thank you. Minister, there are many cases of police stations are no longer fit for purpose – many, many cases. Aside from the absolutely warranted funding for the new Rochester station to replace that damaged by floods, there is no investment in the budget for new or renovated police facilities. Why not?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, we are working through a range of current investments on our Victoria Police capital works – in Narre Warren and Clyde North police stations, for example, where we have already provided some \$68 million for the design and the build of those two police stations in earlier budgets – in 2020–21. I have been with that committee member, the Member for Point Cook, out at his electorate, where we have also purchased the land for the new Point Cook police station. But of course –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All right, Minister. I just want to let you know, because my colleagues to my right are very nervous about anything that is not about this budget, that they get upset about things that are previous budgets, and I think you are talking about previous budgets. Could I come back to the question of why there is no funding for upgrades in this budget going forward?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, there is. There is funding for the new Rochester police station –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I did acknowledge that.

**Anthony CARBINES:** \$1.3 million for the Rochester police station in this budget, but of course one budget in isolation. We have a pipeline of capital works projects, and I touched on those. We have got the Benalla police station, which is a \$28 million build, in your colleague's electorate, and that will be open, we would say, in the early new year, in 2024. We have allocated, of course, that \$5 million for the Point Cook purchase and then a further \$19.81 million for that work, South Melbourne and others.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. We did all this last year, Minister, so thank you.

**Anthony CARBINES:** But that is important –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, it is very important. It is this year that I am interested in.

**Anthony CARBINES:** because you have asked about the pipeline of investment in Victoria Police, and that is the Rochester police station, which we are really keen to see rebuilt for the community.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can I then go back, Chief Commissioner, to mental health. How many hours do police spend transporting patients with mental health conditions where police attendance is not required to manage safety and security risks, it is literally just the sole purpose of attending to transport mental health patients?

**Shane PATTON:** I do not have those figures off the top of it, sorry.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Does the police force keep that data? Could we get it on notice?

**Shane PATTON:** We will see if we can get it, yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Likewise, do you keep data on the total hours spent attending to mental health issues? The first question was about simply transporting. Is there data on transporting and responding to security and safety issues with mental health patients?

**Shane PATTON:** We would keep that, yes.



**Danny O'BRIEN:** And you do not have it on you at the moment?

**Shane PATTON:** No, not that I believe.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Perhaps I could add something on that. Can I?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, unless you have got the data, Minister –

**Anthony CARBINES:** I have got some data, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, you have asked the question. You do not get to decide who answers the question. The minister has said he has got further information to provide.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, if he has got it, I am happy to take it.

**The CHAIR:** Please go ahead, Minister.

**Anthony CARBINES:** What I would say just in follow-up, as a further perspective for Mr O'Brien, would be that Ambulance Victoria transports some 60 per cent of Victorians who are maybe having a mental health episode, where they are being called to those in the community. In about 30 per cent of occasions there will be a dual response from Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria, and in about 10 per cent of those call-outs there will be police directly involved in the transport, where they are quite acute cases. So what I would say, to conclude, is that a very significant amount of that work is done by Ambulance Victoria alone, but there will always be a role for Victoria Police, particularly in those acute cases.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** A further question: do you have the data on how many hours that involves?

**Anthony CARBINES:** I can calculate it into hours, but I have got some percentages, if you are keen.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** If you could give it to us by the end of the hearing, Minister, that would be wonderful.

**Anthony CARBINES:** I will get my calculator out.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Minister, page 111 of the department's questionnaire response shows 16,159 FTE police as at 30 June last year, but the figure on the same date on 2023 is expected to be 333 less, so 333 less police this year, according to your questionnaire. The forecast shows that the figure as of 30 June 2024 is that the department expect to have the same number of police then as we do now. Isn't that effectively a reduction in police numbers, given population forecasts?

**Anthony CARBINES:** No, what we have made a very clear funding commitment to is 3600 additional funded police positions, and that included the \$342 million, dare I say it, in the last budget, the previous budget, for our additional 502 and our 50 protective service officers. We are constantly growing the number of police in Victoria, and we have funded, since we have come to office, an additional 3600 police positions and a commitment with both Victoria Police and the police association to fund an additional 502 extra police and 50 PSOs over the two years of the financial year we are currently in and the next.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** In your opening comments you said that those 502 would be delivered by the end of this year.

**Anthony CARBINES:** The 251 police and 25 PSOs for 2022–23 will be sworn in by June 2023. Then the remaining officers, the other half of that cohort of up to 500, are being recruited, and that will be done by September 2023. We are actually ahead of where we thought we would be.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** September this year?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Victoria Police are on track to recruit the full 502 additional police and 50 PSOs by the end of September this year, which is well ahead of what we have committed to with the police association and Victoria Police in that funded commitment.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Why therefore then does the questionnaire indicate 333 less police overall as at next year?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, I would just say more broadly the funding commitment is there from the government. We have made that very clear about the additional 502. There will be naturally some attrition that we need to account for, and that will be worked through. But the funded positions are there. They have been increased.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Chief Commissioner, as I said, the questionnaire shows a reduction of 333. Is it fair to say the current numbers of new police coming into the force are not keeping up with both natural attrition and covering those on long-term WorkCover and sick leave?

**Shane PATTON:** No, that is not right. The most recent outline that we have had in terms of our recruiting is –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies to interrupt. The time has expired. We will now go to Ms Kathage for the next 7 minutes.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to refer you to page 86 of budget paper 3. There is an initiative there, 'Drug tests on our roads'. Could you please outline for us what will be delivered with this funding and what impact you are expecting it to have on road safety? It is page 86.

**Anthony CARBINES:** It is. Thanks very much, Ms Kathage. Death and serious injury due to drug driving are not inevitable. They are preventable, and our road trauma impacts the lives of collision victims, their families and the wider community. Driving while impaired with drugs, primarily methamphetamine and cannabis, increased over the past decade, and drug driving has overtaken drink driving, believe it or not, as Victoria's leading cause of road trauma. The economic and social costs associated with road trauma make this a major concern in the community.

Between 2019 and 2021, 503 drivers lost their lives on Victorian roads, and of those, 132 or 26 per cent were found to have drugs in their systems. Reversing this trend is key to achieving our toll reduction targets, and Victoria Police operates a very extensive program of roadside testing, with the dual aims of catching and deterring drug drivers. During the recent Operation Nexus over the Easter long weekend, police recorded 175 drug-driving offences from some 3263 roadside drug tests. As you will see in the performance measures in BP3, page 267, despite the impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions, Victoria Police exceeded their target of 150,000 roadside drug tests across 2021–22 and are currently on track to meet this target again for 2022–23. The budget also provided a further \$25.9 million in funding to continue to provide an extra 50,000 roadside drug tests in addition to the 100,000 already covered in Victoria Police's operating budget. So the roadside drug testing has come a long way since the program was first rolled out back in 2005 with funding for just 13,000 tests a year.

The continued funding for additional RDTs will help Victoria Police to prevent those serious injuries and improve safety on our roads. Reducing the number of drug users who drive will create benefits for road users and contribute to the Victorian government's vision, which is challenging at this time as we know, of zero deaths on Victorian roads by 2050. The government recommitted to the *Towards Zero* strategy, of reducing the number of lives lost on Victorian roads and reducing serious injuries by 15 per cent in five years, and released the new *Victorian Road Safety Strategy 2021–2030* in December a few years back, in 2020. The strategy further commits the government to halving road deaths by 2030, eliminating deaths on Victorian roads by 2050 and reducing the incidence of serious injury resulting from road crashes. The Monash University Accident Research Centre, MUARC, well known to many of us here, continues to undertake evidence-based research that drives policy decisions that will help meet the Victorian road safety objectives. I want to take the opportunity to thank them for their incredible work. MUARC have predicted that the impact of these additional 50,000 tests, which we are funding here in the budget, will result in some 21 less fatal collisions and 52 less serious injuries every year. Thanks, Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. You took us to page 267 of BP 3, and there are multiple performance measures in there beyond just drug tests. Can you take us through how other government initiatives are contributing to road safety beyond drug testing?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Sure. Road safety continues to be a major focus for the government. We know it is important, as ever, to continue to focus on getting dangerous, distracted drivers off the roads. Road safety enforcement has a huge role to play here. Recognising its importance, we have provided the investment –

record investment in fact over the years. That includes \$120.6 million to boost mobile speed camera hours by 75 per cent and a progressive increase to full implementation of 16,300 hours a month, as well as a further 96 new state-of-the-art cameras. Originally we expected it to be completed this year, but the extra funding in the 2021–22 budget was provided to have these initiatives delivered two years early, by May 2021. I am pleased to report that these performance measures show 99.5 per cent of Victorian drivers are compliant when travelling past speed cameras. Our 2020–21 budget provided nearly \$50 million over four years for 35 additional fixed road safety cameras installed at high-risk intersections and two new networks of cameras on freeways to deter dangerous driving like speeding, which contributes of course to 30 per cent of fatal crashes on Victorian roads. The first of these new cameras has now begun enforcement, with more to come throughout the year. All sites are carefully chosen, and there is an independent committee of experts from Victoria Police, VicRoads and the department. Location is chosen based on a number of factors including harm, crash history and reports of excessive speeding. Importantly, every dollar raised from those speed camera revenues goes into the Better Roads Victoria Trust Account, which my colleague for road safety Minister Horne has oversight of. That is used to improve road safety and infrastructure and to reduce transport costs for businesses and improve access for local communities. Thanks, Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** So on the issue of cameras, how will the new distracted driver cameras that we have seen a fair bit of in the media improve road safety?

**Anthony CARBINES:** As part of our 2021–30 road safety strategy we committed to implementing distracted driver technology, and I am pleased to report that the first of those cameras is now operating. Road trauma is a significant community issue, as I have touched on. My thoughts are with anyone who has been a victim or been affected by road trauma. One life lost on our roads is one too many. But what we do know is that \$33.7 million investment over five years to develop and implement and use this new technology on Victorian roads has introduced new regulations to ensure that if you are doing the wrong thing you will be held to account. Distracted drivers are estimated to contribute to and factor in 11 per cent of road fatalities. That amounts to some 24 lives lost each year. Driver distraction is also estimated to cause over 400 serious injuries every year. Research has shown this technology, the distracted driver cameras, has the capacity to prevent some 95 casualty crashes per year, saving Victorian lives, and that is something I think we can all be pleased to see put into effect. I have been out to visit those cameras where they have been deployed.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The time has expired. We will go on to Mr McGowan for the next 7 minutes.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Minister, just following up on your answer there, is it just one camera at this stage? How many other cameras are there?

**Anthony CARBINES:** We have got three at the moment that are in operation, but there are more coming online shortly. And we have got about 200 sites across Victoria that have been identified as being able to have those cameras operational. That is in regional Victoria as well; I know they have been up around Shepparton. And the three cameras that are operational now in what is the grace period – so we are operating through to the end of June. We had in April alone nearly 3000 offences detected; they had warning letters. The grace period concludes at the end of June, and then you would be getting a fine, and of course for seatbelts and for distracted drivers with mobiles and the like they are very significant. But we also saw from some of the statistics from MUARC that we will have lives saved from this technology, and with that \$33 million we will be able to bring other distracted-driver cameras online. We have identified sites where it operates effectively, and I am really confident that what we have seen also interstate in other jurisdictions who already have this tech in place – this artificial intelligence technology – is they have been able to demonstrate changes in driver behaviour.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Minister, when you expect those other cameras? Do you have a date when you think those other cameras will actually be in place?

**Anthony CARBINES:** It is really just mostly a contract, manufacturing and then placement. So we have got three that are on the road. I am happy to provide further details of the timing of the others –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** That would be great. If you could take that on notice, that would be much appreciated.

**Anthony CARBINES:** but they are certainly rolling through. I think the last point I just wanted to make in relation to that is the intel that is coming back to us in those 3000 offences from April alone, which is really highlighting seatbelts and phones – people not wearing seatbelts and on their phones – we will feed into our road safety partners, because that will inform the sort of work we need to do in our road safety campaigns when you think –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I appreciate that very much, Minister. Chief Commissioner, with less full-time equivalent police available due to attrition, do you have the data on the impact on response times in Victoria?

**Shane PATTON:** We do not measure response times in Victoria.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Okay. At all? There is not an internal mechanism to assess when a call is received and when it is responded to?

**Shane PATTON:** No, because Victoria is a very different jurisdiction to other jurisdictions in that we have ESTA who perform the role. They then allocate, say, a job out to us, and a sergeant will determine – an operational supervisor out on the road will determine – whether that job gets held or not or whether it is a priority 1 job. And so the reality is the measurement of that would actually potentially create a risk because of the set-up that we have, which is different to what occurs in other jurisdictions.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Can I just add something to that, please, Chair? I would like to add to that if I could.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I will come back to you, Minister, in just a moment.

**The CHAIR:** The minister would like to add something to the question to help clarify.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I appreciate that. I am more than happy for the minister to provide something after today's hearing, but I have got 7 minutes and I need to move through that.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, it is important, if the Chief is commenting on these matters, that I could add one point, which is that in 2015 the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report into emergency service response times found that response times alone would not be directly relevant to Victoria Police and that there were no systemic issues regarding the timeliness of response times to urgent calls by Victoria Police.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Okay, I think we are just making a statement, but I appreciate the minister reminding me of an Ombudsman's report that is already on the public record. It is much appreciated.

Chief Commissioner, I draw your attention to the same page we are on already, page 267. Isn't it true that the target for roadside alcohol testing was missed by such a long way? It was 1 million tests, or 33 per cent, short of target, not because of COVID-19 but I guess because of staff shortages, which have obviously engulfed the organisation. Is that correct?

**Shane PATTON:** No, so in terms of the tests that we have done – the alcohol testing – there are a range of matters there. We had deployment for the floods in the third quarter, or the second quarter, I should say. There were – I will just get the details – over 2000 members I think who were deployed for the floods and something like 120,000-odd shifts. Sorry, it was 2216 members deployed with a total of 12,212 shifts covered, and that was in quarter 3, if you like. So obviously our response to floods we always deploy, and that took away a lot of the ability in terms of the generalised approach and the booze bus approaches.

In addition to that, though – and I did say earlier I was not going to blame COVID or try to blame COVID, but just to contextualise it against COVID – we did have through COVID a situation where members had to double-glove with their plastic gloves on. They had to wipe down the –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Chief Commissioner, I appreciate that during COVID that was an issue. I suppose what I am actually getting at here is: wouldn't this concern you, though, that potentially 33 per cent of those people have –

**Shane PATTON:** Can I just finish the explanation about that? You do not want to hear the reasoning why.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** No, to be quite honest – not in respect to the gloves and the COVID, no.

**Shane PATTON:** No. So that was a reason –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** What I am concerned about is that if we had 1 million tests short, we actually had quite a lot of drivers who were committing offences, and they were on our roads. That concerns me. Does it not concern you?

**Shane PATTON:** As I was saying, the reason why we did not get to those numbers was –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I know why we did not. I am asking whether it concerns you.

**Shane PATTON:** Well, sorry, I do not know whether you do, because I have not been allowed to finish the answer. The answer is that, in that quarter, we had recently changed, and by changing that we are then allowed now so that we do not have the same process to go through. Of course I am concerned if we do not get the targets that we want, because the whole basis of that is on a generalised model so that people will not know when they are going to be tested and that we can put it right across the population. So it does concern me, but you can only do what you can do, and I think a response to (a) the community in terms of flood and also (b) making sure that my members were able to do what they could do in a safe, healthy manner through COVID meant that we could not achieve those targets.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you, Chief Commissioner. We share that concern.

It has been put to me by the shadow minister that there is a culture of absenteeism within Victoria Police. Based on the numbers, do you agree with this statement?

**Shane PATTON:** I would not describe it as a culture of absenteeism, but we certainly have higher unplanned leave at the moment than I would like, most definitely. So yes is the answer – that there is higher unplanned leave at this time. I do not think it is a cultural issue, though. I have been out and about visiting many police stations and continue to do so, and I see a culture of people who are really committed to achieving positive outcomes for the organisation and for the community. But there is, at this stage, higher unplanned leave than I would like, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Your time has expired, Mr McGowan. We will go on to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister, Chief Commissioner and officials. I might take you back to some of the line of questioning from Ms Kathage, if that is possible, Minister. You talked about some of the mental health outcomes, and I hope I am not misquoting here – 1 per cent versus 44 per cent completion rates around mental health is a fantastic result, but I am just thinking about some of those further initiatives or investments that we might be making around mental health. So what are those investments, if there are any, and has the government made extra supports for that wellbeing of police officers available?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks very much for your question, Mr Hilakari. In particular can I just say that some of the particular programs that we touched on in the budget have related to our BlueHub program. That \$4 million investment in the budget has made a really significant I suppose boost in what has already been touched on, even by Mr McGowan earlier, and that is those issues in relation to when we talk about absenteeism or making sure that people are well at work. The prevalence of mental health issues of course among police service members is a concern, and it is why the government is committed to providing additional support and resources.

BlueHub, which was launched in July 2021, is really significant in the work that it is able to do, particularly as a request I think from the police association in our discussions with them. What has been happening in particular is that they represent their workforce. They do that without fear or favour. In their engagement with the Commonwealth and then with our government they said what would be really effective would be an additional investment in this budget. And at the last election we made the commitment to them and to their members about the BlueHub program, which was working effectively but needed to be broadened out. Of those 155 police members to date who are undergoing treatment, the 36 members on the waiting list and the 84 members who have completed treatment – how can we roll that out further? How can we make sure that Victoria Police members, for their health and wellbeing, are able to get to specialist medical appointments and specialist medical practitioners who have an understanding of the challenges that first responders face? No disrespect to medical practitioners – they are busy and they work hard – but if we can try and have a pipeline

and a focus around first responders being able to connect with practitioners and experts who understand the challenges that are unique to first responders, we will get better outcomes and also get moving a little quicker on the engagement and on making people feel comfortable and confident about the support that is available to them.

So it is that BlueHub program in particular, and expanding that in this budget, that is critical to our work. But I did just want to touch on one of our other particular programs there, which is our Early Intervention and Prevention Fund. In particular the work of that fund and our emergency workers mental healthcare fund, which is \$6 million, are about broadening out our programs but with a targeted focus on connecting more first responders, particularly Victoria Police, to medical practitioners who understand and have an empathy for the services that they particularly need tailored to keep them fit and well and get them back to work. That is the process that we have been able to fund in this budget.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I might just bring you forward to road safety policy, and with particular reference to budget paper 3, page 86 and page 267. What other policy work is underway to drive down road trauma?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The government has invested some \$385 million to deliver the road safety action plan, and that is through new safety structures and strategies to increase public awareness and the innovative programs to protect vulnerable road users. In 2021 Victoria Police launched Operation Achilles. It is a statewide operation targeting illegal hoon gatherings and other unacceptable high-risk driving activities that put lives at risk. Specialist police units, including highway patrol, crime investigation units and divisional response units, are working together to catch those hoons. Operation Achilles is ongoing, and it has had a noticeable impact on the number of high-risk driving incidents across the state, particularly in the southern, northern and west metro regions, which have been areas of concern.

Victoria Police have also been reducing road trauma by being out in force, targeting speed, distraction and drink and drug driving plus motorcyclist behaviour during high-risk periods. Operation Arid captured some 6700 total offences over the 2023 Labour Day long weekend; while Operation Nexus, which we launched heading into the Easter period, recorded a further 7700 offences across the 2023 Easter long weekend. So we certainly have our police members and our services and our resources out there, and those sorts of results are also giving us an indication of the sorts of offences being committed on our roads. The operations aim to reduce those incidents and the severity of road trauma at a time when more people are of course on the roads, in the holiday destinations and the like.

It is also about recognising the importance of legislation and laws to combat emerging behaviours. We introduced some legislation to ensure drivers who are charged with certain offences are also immediately suspended from driving. The immediate licence suspension scheme, ILS, came into force in November a couple of years back and was expanded in 2022. Under that expanded scheme individuals charged with hit-and-run offences and other serious road safety offences will have their licences immediately suspended until a court outcome is finalised. These amendments to the ILS framework will support the aim of the road safety strategy to improve safety on the roads. It reduces those risks posed by dangerous drivers and improves road safety outcomes for all Victorians. One that I find is the case when I visit our police stations, and that they talk about a lot, is the investment around \$43.8 million to put automatic number plate recognition, or ANPR, technology in all 221 highway patrol cars in Victoria. Those systems scan numberplates at a rapid rate compared to scanning numberplates to a database, and they contain information on vehicles of interest – unregistered vehicles and the like. Those system alerts give police the information they need for appropriate enforcement action. It has been a real game changer in fact, and I know that they appreciate that technology. It serves police very well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The next 7 minutes goes to Ms Sandell.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, everybody. I also want to ask about the extra 502 sworn members that you referred to in your presentation. So, Minister, my understanding is that Victoria Police currently has almost 2000 more staff than New South Wales, despite having a smaller population. So why is this necessary?

**Anthony CARBINES:** There are more funded police positions in Victoria than over the border in New South, but I think that is also then reflected in a range of outcomes that we are able to have here in Victoria, and perhaps I could just touch on a couple of those. In particular new data on our offence rate shows that while

there has been an 0.5 per cent increase, it remains below 2019 levels, so we are going back to pre-COVID levels; and the criminal incident rate, which is a 0.3 decrease, has again recorded its lowest level since 2005. What we are finding in Victoria in particular is that the additional 3600 funded police positions – and we are recruiting too – have also got a marked connection with flat crime rates generally in Victoria and demonstrate that our police are doing their job effectively and that those resources and those additional positions are paying dividends around community safety.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Okay. Thank you. But on that logic, if our offence rate is now back to below 2019 levels, why do we need an additional 500 police?

**Anthony CARBINES:** The chief may have some thoughts on this, but I would have thought we also need to look at our trend data. The new crime statistics for, I think, the March quarter are out in the next week or so. It is a constant effort, isn't it? I think that with COVID and that interesting period there, where perhaps there was less public activity, it is important to try to bring our figures back to the benchmark of pre COVID, when more people were around and perhaps there was more activity for police to manage in different ways. But ultimately we need to look at the trend over time. It is a constant effort. I do not know if the chief has anything further to add around, I suppose, the work that is a constant effort in a growing population to keep a handle on our crime rates.

**Shane PATTON:** Yes. Thank you. I think, importantly for us, having the extra police that we have been provided over the last few years has allowed us a flexibility. It has allowed us to be able to launch a neighbourhood policing model. If you reflect, everyone would know that during COVID obviously it hurt us a little bit in terms of public confidence because of the enforcement role that Victoria Police took on. Since then I have launched the neighbourhood policing model, where it is a real back-to-basics approach, and that is about us engaging with the community, creating neighbourhood policing teams, going along and having local safety committees, listening to the issues that the community have and then dealing with those in real time. The extra police allows that. Also we have seen over a period of time it allows us to use specialist police, as we have in family violence. I mean, family violence is one of the most abhorrent crimes that we have seen, and it continues to grow. Some people will say that it is because we have now a greater confidence in the community to report to us because of the 415 police that we have been able to put into a family violence focus. We have created 31 specific family violence units across the state. It gives you the flexibility to be able to (a) generalise and (b) target specific offences and also just to be able to get back to the basics as well as attending to crimes in a much more timely manner. For me it has been significant in allowing us to create units such as a gang crime squad, illicit firearms teams and in a whole range of different areas – so give me another 10,000 if you want to.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you. I think it still remains to be seen whether we need so many more and so many more per capita than New South Wales. I just want to move on to another topic, which is the \$3.5 million allocated to early intervention to counter violent extremism. How much of that is specifically around countering far-right extremism, given the pretty disturbing things we have seen around the rise of neo-Nazi groups and far-right extremism?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, that is right. It is a really serious issue, and I am glad that you have raised it, Ms Sandell. In the budget in particular we have the \$3.52 million that you touched on for the next two years in relation to countering violent extremism. I have been out to the Northern Community Support Group out Broady way; they do amazing and fantastic work. What we want to be able to do is make sure that there are a couple of different elements. We have the crowded places safety program, which you would probably be familiar with, representing the capital city in particular, which was about crowded places and targeting places that potentially could be subject to a terrorist attack. We did a lot of capital works around bollards and the like, which I touched on earlier. But also what we are doing there with those funds is continuing to provide funds for the Northern Community Support Group and the work that they are doing in particular around their intervention programs with individuals that have been identified in the community as at risk at an early stage and adopting some of those approaches. They are doing really good work getting to disengaged young people in particular, making sure that they are role models and they are engaging around employment. Often people are discriminated against and then they can find a lack of opportunities and they fall into the wrong crowd, and we see that particularly in the work that the Northern Community Support Group have been able to do.

**Ellen SANDELL:** I appreciate that. Sorry, I just have such limited time. I guess I want to ask specifically about countering far-right extremism and neo-Nazi groups. Maybe the commissioner can talk to that.

**Shane PATTON:** Yes. The continued funding allows us to implement one of the most advanced countering violent extremism programs in the world. We have a community integration support program, which is predominantly focused on religiously motivated violent extremism. But in addition to that we also now have a network for intervention and targeted engagement, which is solely focused on right-wing extremism, and through the work and taking the principles that we have learned since I think around 2010, when we had the previous program in, we have been able to focus on right wing.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. The time has expired. I am going to hand over to Mr Hamer for the last session.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you, Minister, Chief Commissioner and officials. I would like to just talk about 'Reducing future justice demand and keeping the community safe'. Page 86 mentions the Aboriginal youth cautioning program, and I was just wondering if you could explain in a bit more detail what that program is and how it improves outcomes for young Aboriginal Victorians.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks, Mr Hamer. The government understands that most Aboriginal Victorians have no direct contact with the criminal justice system. They just do not. We do know that Aboriginal Victorians are over-represented in the criminal justice system and, sadly, for too many people, in particular young people, their first interaction with the criminal justice system can be the start of sustained contact. The Aboriginal youth cautioning program was developed through engagement with Aboriginal communities. It is an important program that aims to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the youth justice system, and for members of the committee who may be unfamiliar with the term, a caution is a formal alternative to charging an individual. It means that a person is not required to attend court for their alleged offending. The program involves local police and Aboriginal community services working together to respond to the needs of Aboriginal young people who come into contact with police, to ensure the first contact with police is their last, and the AYCP was developed in response to feedback from the Aboriginal community and is guided by principles of self-determination. The program connects our young people with culturally relevant support to ensure community leaders have an opportunity to engage with young people early in the justice system.

Initially trialled at Bendigo, Echuca and Greater Dandenong, the AYCP is now being expanded to some 20 sites across the state, and further sites will be identified by Victoria Police in consultation with our Aboriginal communities. The government has invested some \$4.99 million in the most recent state budget to ensure the program continues what is really critical and important work, and since the rollout of the AYCP, cautioning rates for alleged offenders aged 10 to 17 have increased from 22 per cent in 2019 to 32 per cent in 2022 and the rate of cautioning for first-time youth offenders has increased from 53 per cent in 2019 to 72 per cent in 2022. They are pretty impressive results and a credit I think to the strong engagement between local police, who have really grasped this program and seen its value, and our Aboriginal communities, who really have helped to get it established. Recent changes to the cautioning program requirements include the removal now of a requirement that an alleged youth offender has to admit to the offending. That has further increased the success of the Aboriginal youth cautioning program. The AYCP is one more component in tackling that over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the justice system, and our investment will ensure this important work can continue. Thanks, Mr Hamer.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you, Minister. Just over the page, page 87 mentions an expansion of the embedded youth outreach program to a number of local government areas, and I was wondering if you could just detail to the committee what that program is and how that is improving outcomes for young people.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thank you. The embedded youth outreach program is an intervention program that sees Victoria Police members paired with trained youth workers, and that provides an after-hours response and referral service for young people who come into contact with police. It is based in Werribee and Dandenong, and the program covers the police service areas of Wyndham, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia. The program is targeted at young people aged between 10 and 24 years of age. It is designed to respond to the complex needs of young people who are at risk of long-term involvement with the criminal justice system, and the EYOP can respond to any young person who comes to the attention of police, including first-time offenders, victims, missing persons and secondary offenders. It refers vulnerable young offenders and victims to support services, including mental health, alcohol and other drugs, education, employment, legal and housing services, and the program ensures young people are receiving face-to-face



engagement during their most vulnerable moments. It is a program that engages the families of young persons to ensure people have the support they need at home via specialised services.

The 2023–24 budget invests \$7.37 million to expand the embedded youth outreach program to Brimbank, Melton and Shepparton police service areas – that is where the data is telling us we need to focus our effort. It was rolled out first in 2019, and as at March this year there have been 7834 engagements with young people and 1000 referrals made for participants to support services. An evaluation of the program undertaken a couple of years back in 2020 showed a 9 per cent decrease in the offence rate of participants with a history of offending. So the program provides police with a unique opportunity to pair their skills and knowledge from the front line with the expertise of our youth support workers, who do super amazing work. As part of our record investments of more than \$4.5 billion in Victoria Police since we came to office, which has funded those 3637 additional police positions, we have also got 48 youth specialist officers across the state. It is programs like EYOP that are critical, because our government understands that tackling the root cause of youth offending cannot be solved through a police response or a criminal justice response alone. Thank you.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you, Minister. If I could take you back to recruitment, you made some points in your presentation – and it has been canvassed through the hearing – about the additional police recruitment, including the Made for More initiative. I was just wondering what the government is doing to support this recruitment drive.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Sure. In particular I think I am going to focus on the Made for More campaign, which is designed to raise awareness around the diversity of roles in Victoria Police and increase our application rates. We touched earlier on application rates from 1 January to March this year being up 85 per cent on the same period last year. It is working. And what that means of course is our police academy is full, with double squads graduating every fortnight, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I will stop you there. The time has expired. That is the end of questions for this session.

Minister, Chief Commissioner and department officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is now going to take a lunch break before beginning the consideration of the crime prevention portfolio at 1:45 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**