

CORRECTED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2002–03 budget estimates

Melbourne – 2 July 2002

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Mr A. Haermeyer, Minister for Police and Emergency Services;
Chief Commissioner C. Nixon, Victoria Police;
Mr P. Harmsworth, Secretary; and
Mr A. Clayton, Deputy Secretary, Justice Operations, Department of Justice.

The CHAIRMAN — We will resume on the portfolio of police and emergency services. I welcome to this hearing the Chief Commissioner of Police, Ms Christine Nixon.

Minister, would you care to make a brief presentation to the committee on the budget estimates for police and emergency services?

Mr HAERMEYER — Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. Once again I have to indicate that we are hampered by the technology or its failure here today so I will have to go through the slides the committee has been presented with. As in the last presentation we have a pie chart which indicates the distribution of funds across the Department of Justice. It indicates that the police and emergency services portfolio makes up 61 per cent of the total \$2.04 billion budget of the Department of Justice, and that adds up to \$1247.7 million within that portfolio.

The break-up within police and emergency services is reflected in seven output groups, five of which are Victoria Police outputs. Victoria Police makes up 92.3 per cent or \$1.152 billion dollars of the total portfolio budget. The balance, firstly, is on public safety policy and emergency prevention and response, and that deals with policy groups within the Department of Justice such as crime prevention and the Victorian Council against Violence and also the emergency services agencies — the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, the SES, the Bureau of Emergency Services Telecommunications and the annual government contributions to the two fire brigades, the Country Fire Authority and the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board. You will see that the pie chart breaks up across those portfolio groups.

Crime identification and investigation accounts for \$345 million or 29 per cent of that budget; road safety, \$96.7 million or 8 per cent; supporting the judicial process takes up 16 per cent — that is \$197.6 million; public safety policy, \$12.7 million or 1 per cent; emergency prevention and response, \$83 million or 7 per cent; crime prevention, \$348.4 million or 29 per cent; and there is an added emphasis within both the Department of Justice and Victoria Police in preventing crime rather than just responding to it. We will go into some more detail about that later. Incident, emergency and event management is \$127.5 million or 11 per cent of that total budget.

In terms of comparisons between the published budgets in 2001–02 and 2002–03, we have an increase of \$0.3 million or 2.4 per cent in public policy. Emergency prevention and response is up 26.5 per cent, and that again reflects the significant enhancements that are made, particularly within the budget of the Country Fire Authority. Crime prevention reflects an 11.5 per cent increase and, as I say, there are significant things going on in prevention across both Victoria Police and the department. There is an increase in incident, emergency and event management of 10.7 per cent, which largely reflects the continuing exponential growth in the number of major events that we hold in this state on a regular basis. There is a 12.7 per cent increase in crime identification and investigation, an 11.3 per cent increase in road safety, and an 11.4 per cent increase in supporting the judicial process.

The most clear-cut highlight of this portfolio over the last year has been the delivery of 800 additional police on the ground. Prior to the last election we committed to increasing the number of police at the coalface by 800 over a four-year term of this government. Despite the fact that we were consistently being told that we would not achieve it even as late as early this year, we have achieved that, and we did so some 18 months ahead of the termination of the four-year term of this government. It is a great achievement. I want to particularly pay credit to the recruiting and training people of Victoria Police who have done a great job, and also to the people who put together that wonderful advertising campaign which not only attracted in excess of 50 000 people to inquire about a police career but also made a lot of Victorians more aware of the sort of work that our police do. When morale had reached rock-bottom low it made police feel a lot better about the job that they do.

The other areas of achievement include the delivery of two twin-engine N3 helicopters to Victoria Police, which significantly boosts our air wing. One is a dedicated police helicopter which can be reconfigured as an ambulance if needed and the other is a shared police-ambulance vehicle. These choppers are much faster and have much more power; they can get to all parts of Victoria without the need to refuel, and that significantly enhances response times, particularly in some of the more outlying parts of the Victoria such as Mildura or Bairnsdale.

We are also committed to improving the personal safety of Victorian police. In doing that we expect to take delivery fairly soon of 8600 personal-issue ballistic vests and 420 metal detectors, which are going out to operational units. That is largely to deal with the concern that I have frequently expressed about the increasing propensity of young people in particular to arm themselves with knives. Two hundred vehicle screens are to be fitted to police vehicles to protect officers who are transporting people in the back of cars to and from various locations. Also 8600 personal-issue lightweight equipment belts will be issued. Because of the increasing level of

equipment that we expect police to carry these days, their job has been made a bit more cumbersome, and to give them state-of-the-art, lightweight utility belts is very important as well.

The third area I want to focus on is the conclusion last year of the police enterprise bargaining agreement, which makes our police the best remunerated police force in the country. It has significantly contributed to the enhancement of morale that I discussed earlier. Morale in Victoria Police was at rock bottom. The last enterprise bargaining agreement, which was done in 1996, resulted in police getting a 3 per cent increase per annum over three years. No account was taken of the value of work that they contribute to the community, the dangers that they have to face, and it was paid for by a deliberate reduction in police numbers of 800. For police to get this significant pay increase, to be paid what they are worth, and to have their numbers increased as well has resulted in a significant improvement in morale.

I might also add that I want to pay my congratulations to the work that the chief commissioner has done. In her consultations with her members she has been very aggressive, out on the front foot, in talking to members, asking them what they want and trying to make the organisation more responsive to the needs of its members. Those three things put together have been a huge achievement in Victoria Police. They have turned around what was a very desperate situation in 1999 with insufficient police to keep up with the workload and rising crime rates which we are now finally, with the added police on the ground, starting to see turn around, and improved morale. I think it is a good story all around.

We have engaged upon the largest-ever capital works program or police station building program within Victoria Police. We currently have under way 65 new or replacement police stations at a cost of around \$120 million. Twenty two of those are major 24-hour stations in metropolitan and regional locations and 43 are smaller one-person or two-person stations. That is largely about reassuring those communities about the future of policing in their particular areas.

We also have a new justice complex under construction at Morwell to service the Latrobe Valley. Also under construction out at the police academy is a new \$8.5 million operational tactics and training facility, which is about improving the capacity of Victoria Police to deal with operational situations, enabling them to do training in real life scenarios. That will both enhance the safety of our police and enable us to reduce the likelihood of things such as police shootings in the future as well. That facility also is well overdue.

I do have to mention road safety and our road fatality count. Last year 421 people died on our roads. If that number of people were killed through homicide or suicide, we would be absolutely up in arms. Yet for some reason there seems to be this tolerance in some sections of the community of people speeding and breaking the law — doing all the things that put their lives and other road users' lives at risk.

So we have embarked upon a major strategy called Arrive Alive. It deals with road safety on all fronts, including improving road safety and improving the condition of our roads, particularly the black spots — the areas that statistically we are shown are the highest risk areas. It also includes putting some divider barriers on roads such as the Western Ring Road and the Monash Freeway. There is money there also for education. There is also a focus on response to emergencies. The quicker and more effectively we can deliver road accident rescue services, the more likely people are to survive.

The particular focus in this portfolio has always been on the enforcement side. While some people are of the view that education is the only thing you need to do — and education is important, I do not deny that — the main reason people die on our roads is not because they do not know what the road rules are but because they choose to break them. The only way you combat that is by enforcement, by increasing the perception in their own minds of the likelihood of getting caught if they speed, drink drive or break any other rules. For that reason Victoria Police is making a major effort in terms of enforcement. We have provided financing for an additional 24 fixed speed cameras. Those fixed speed cameras will go on the Geelong road, the Westgate Freeway, the Western Ring Road and the Monash Freeway, and they will be about letting drivers know that if they choose to speed the probability that they will be caught is very high. Drivers can avoid paying those fines very easily, and that is by keeping their eyes on the speedo and driving within the rules.

We have also commissioned new booze buses. There are four country booze buses now operating throughout regional Victoria — new buses designed to get police around country Victoria much more quickly than in the past. They are a smaller, more mobile unit. One of the big concerns in country Victoria is the grapevine, where people seem to think they can take the back way home or someone will always ring them and know where the police are. If the police can move more quickly, that grapevine will break down.

Alcohol in particular is still a major contributor, particularly in regional Victoria. I might add that in the year-to-date figures we are starting to see a reduction in the number of road fatalities in metropolitan Melbourne of nearly 10 per cent, but there is about a 30 per cent increase in rural Victoria. What that shows is that the psychological impact of the speed cameras has had its desired effect in metropolitan Melbourne, but we now need to change the perception of rural Victorians that they can get away with speeding or drink-driving. That will then hopefully turn that around as well. I might also add that whilst we have had that increase in the road toll over a number of years now we actually have had a reduction in the actual number of collisions. We also need to look at road deaths as a proportion of cars on the road, not just in absolute numbers.

I will not go on. There is some further information in those folders in relation to crime prevention, which is a very strong focus of the government and of Victoria Police. It is about trying to prevent crime before it occurs. We have now established Crime Prevention Victoria within the Department of Justice. Its role is to try to make crime prevention the core business of all government agencies and also to work crime prevention into the activities of local government and of businesses as well. Victoria Police are also focusing very heavily on crime prevention with their local priority policing strategy and I suppose what you might call an intelligence-led approach to policing, which is about trying to identify where crimes are being committed, at what times and under what circumstances and about using more timely information rather than looking at the crime statistics every 6 or 12 months and then responding to a phenomenon well after it has already occurred. This is about using timely, up-to-the-minute information, responding to it and trying to identify the circumstances behind it, and dealing with those.

We can talk about that in more detail later. In particular that approach reflects a concept that I saw in operation in New York, called Comstat, whereby police are effectively made accountable for the reduction and prevention of crime in their areas, getting crime rates down and measuring police by reducing crime rather than by measuring things such as arrest rates and clearance rates — which are not necessarily a good reflection — or measuring inputs such as patrol hours. As I say, I am happy to go on and talk about that in more detail if you wish to do so later on.

Also, as I say, we are keen to be better prepared for emergencies. The Country Fire Authority is well into its strategic resource initiative, which is about providing better training to the volunteers within CFA stations, providing paid staff in some of those growing outer metropolitan areas where we are finding difficulty keeping up with the workload with volunteers and providing better training to the volunteers, better equipment and better trucks. Also this year for the first time we have announced a significant boost to the budget of the State Emergency Service, which I think in the past has been treated rather poorly as a sort of a poor third cousin of emergency services. We have provided it with an accelerated truck replacement program, which will deliver 30 new rescue vehicles to the SES by December this year. The first ones of those are already going out to units at the moment. Also there have been increases in recent times to the operational subsidies of SES units.

One very important program, the community safety emergency support program, which provides funding to the SES and to the CFA through the Community Support Fund, is a very vital cog in that, because one thing that often is not acknowledged is that as well as getting the equipment provided by those two agencies our volunteers in both the SES and the CFA also do a significant amount of fundraising for additional items of equipment to better service their communities. In the past they have received no support for that. The community safety emergency support program provides matching grants that enable trucks or other items of equipment to be more quickly achieved or to be achieved where otherwise it might be prohibitive for that brigade or unit. That is a program of \$1.5 million over each of three years, and it has been a welcome program for each of those agencies. There is a lot of detail in that. I will not go through it all ad nauseam but will expand on any items you may wish to ask about.

The CHAIRMAN — You commented during your presentation about a different way of compiling performance measures for policing. I recall that last year when you were before this committee you referred to your dissatisfaction with the performance measures in your output groups. Can you identify for the committee whether you are still of the opinion that those output groups are not a true representation of outputs for the financial year and your view of the appropriateness of perhaps moving towards performance measures more like the New York ones that you indicated?

Mr HAERMMEYER — Our output measures have been characterised by things such as hours spent performing certain activities. Apart from the fact that there are often classification difficulties because often the activities being undertaken by police will fit across a number of those categories, the hours spent can only be allocated to one of those categories. They also reflect inputs rather than outputs. The way you measure the performance of a police force is the way it does what it is there to do — that is, to cut crime. Last year, as I hinted before, I was in New York accompanied by Deputy Commissioner Nancarrow when we saw a program called Comstat in operation, which also operates in different guises in a number of other American jurisdictions. It is

about the police saying, 'Our core responsibility is to get the crime rate down'. That is not to say it is only a police responsibility, as often crime is a responsibility of others, also. Look at car theft: the main thing about car theft or theft from cars is that people do not lock their cars, they do not fit immobilisers or they leave valuables such as mobile phones in their cars. It is about getting information across to people and drawing resources together and making the police the central agency that is responsible for doing that. I will ask the chief commissioner to expand on that briefly.

Chief Comm. NIXON — The discussion we had last time was one about so many millions of hours and the way it is divided across categories. The issue is not necessarily about the categories but about how you may measure the performance of the organisation. We have looked this year at starting to think about those measures and then coming to a point in part of the five-year plan where we hope to put forward a model that has consensus about how you may judge a performance. We are not suggesting that we do not wish to be accountable, but we would like measures that are related to on-the-ground police officers who understand what we are trying to deliver and what their part of the process is. Then we aggregate up to the state. You might look at crime and, as we said recently, at a 10 per cent drop in motor vehicle theft as one of the indicators. The current indicators do not ask us that, but it seems that is relevant. It allows a focus. If you took that on burglaries or family violence those sorts of issues would be taken into account.

We look to have a more agreed process of what is relevant rather than, as is one of the measures, having 2.5 million patrol hours. On the notion of patrol hours being relevant to reducing crime, there is a reasonable theory that says that if you are out and about you see things, but it is more reasonable that, if you take the minister's Comstat notion, you are out and about and at the right place at the right time, focusing on the right offenders. That would be the relevant kind of measure. We do not say we do not want to be accountable, but we are suggesting that there needs to be a far more focused approach to it at a local level. Over the next three months, after reasonable consultation, we would come back to the minister, the government more broadly and the community about how we think it would be more appropriate to be measured for our performance.

The CHAIRMAN — This committee, which historically has had a keen interest in performance measures, would be of the view that more relevant performance measures that look at outcomes rather than inputs actually make you more accountable rather than less accountable. That is the sort of thing we would welcome — the redesign of the performance measures in that way.

Mr DAVIS — On performance measures I, and the committee I think, accept the general point that outcomes are a much better measure, but when we look at budget figures we also see some indication of where the department believes resources ought to be deployed. Sometimes the internal measures can be an indication of where the budget or the department wants to put resources. For example, I see on page 200 — —

Ms BARKER — Is this a question or a follow up?

Mr DAVIS — Either way, I don't mind. The total hours of investigation on illegal drug activity, for example, show your total hours of investigation with a target of 600 000 but an expected outcome of 560 000 hours. How do you reconcile that sort of fall of 40 000 hours in resources devoted to illegal drug activity? It seems there is a really significant drug problem, and that shows something about the way the resources of the department are being deployed.

Chief Comm. NIXON — There are two ways to account for that. One is that we collect that data on the basis of two surveys a year, which are done across the organisation. We usually do those in November and April. In this financial year the November survey did not occur because members had work bans in place. We have had to rely on the April survey, which was a two-week survey across the organisation of the time being devoted under those categories.

I am not sure that that is the most effective manner, but it cost us \$500 000. I am not prepared to spend more money trying to determine whether we have spent our resources in that fashion. It is a matter of how you collect the data as indicated in the outputs, but the second part — particularly with regard to drugs — is to note that there has been quite a change in the drug market in Victoria primarily related to the decline in the amount of heroin available within the state. That started in January 2001 across the eastern seaboard and moved across the whole of the country. You see it in the number of deaths from heroin-related overdoses.

Mr DAVIS — But you are not seriously suggesting there is not a problem with drugs, as there is quite a massive problem?

Chief Comm. NIXON — I am saying there is a range of ways to analyse it.

Mr HAERMEYER — The drug activity of Victoria Police is largely a demand-driven sort of thing. It is a considerable credit to both Victoria Police and police forces around Australia, including the Australian Federal Police, that we have a reduction in the prevalence of heroin on our streets. That is also reflected in the year-to-date crime statistics that show that drug cultivation, manufacturing and trafficking as at 29 April is down by 21.3 per cent.

Mr DAVIS — Is this your 10-month statistic?

Mr HAERMEYER — As to the level of hours spent by police, apart from the measurement issues referred to by the chief commissioner you would expect that if drug activities are down, the amount of hours spent by police investigating them would come down also.

Mr HOLDING — Minister, if I could take you to page 82 of budget paper no. 2 — and this includes the description in the public safety and justice section of the government's commitment to increasing police numbers by 800 frontline police — I note from your presentation that you have been able to report to the committee that this target has been achieved and that it has been achieved 18 months ahead of the four-year expiry of the government's term. Can you provide the committee with some information about the success of the recruitment campaign? You mentioned that it generated 50 000 inquiries to Victoria Police about career options in the police force. I am also wondering if you could take the committee through not only the benefits of having those extra police on the street but also the effect of the recruitment strategy and the enterprise bargaining agreement on attrition in the police service.

Mr HAERMEYER — Certainly. We came into a situation where we had had a reduction of 800 in the number of police over a very deliberate program of attrition between 1996 and 1999. That was effectively to pay for the pay rises that they were given back in 1996. The numbers were still declining when we came to office. To turn that around was difficult when you had a period of very low morale and where people were walking from Victoria Police in droves — I think there were months where the numbers leaving the police force, if you analysed it out, would have been about 1 in 10 — so we had continuing reductions for a few months after we came in.

We put in place an advertising campaign which I think was a very successful one. We had 50 000-plus responses to that. That gave us a very wide choice of people from which to select applicants to the police academy. I might, if you are interested, go shortly into some of the breakdowns too, because we are very keen to try to increase the number of women in Victoria Police. I think from memory the percentages coming into the academy have gone up from about 27 per cent to about 31 per cent. We can still do better than that, I am sure, but it is a significant improvement.

We also need to do better in terms of recruiting people from particular ethnic backgrounds as well. I think we have a very good selection of people, including people from very diverse backgrounds. I have often said that I think it is important that our police force reflects the community it comes from — people who have done various other jobs through various times in their lives. It still has a proportion of young recruits straight out of university, or whatever, but it has a lot of people with a lot of different life experiences. That is very important. The average age of our recruits now I think is about 29, which is up significantly from a figure that was around about 21 or 22. I think that is important as well — having that diversity of experience out there.

It has been a highly successful campaign. We have achieved, as the Auditor-General acknowledged, that additional 800 ahead of time. I think what that means is that we are able to allocate police to those high-priority areas where previously we had shortages. It also means for those police stations that are not necessarily getting additional police officers that their police will not be consistently out in the neighbouring suburbs filling shortfalls in those areas, so they can police their own suburbs more effectively than they were doing when they had to cover for shortages elsewhere.

I think we are now starting to see that in terms of the crime rate. The first thing you have to do is get the police on the ground. You have to give them the tools to do the job. I think they are now starting to vindicate that investment. If you have a look at the crime rate in those year-to-date figures I referred to earlier on, for burglary, both aggravated and residential, there have been significant increases. Aggravated burglary has gone up by hundreds of per cent over the last five years or so. For the first time in many years that has turned around. It is down in the year to date by 6.6 per cent. Residential burglary is down by 8 per cent. Looking at things like theft of motor vehicles, that is — —

Mr DAVIS — Homicide?

Mr HAERMEYER — The homicide figures are — —

Mr DAVIS — Assault?

Mr HAERMEYER — Homicide figures are statistically very low, so they will bounce up and down from year to year.

Mr DAVIS — That is not the case with assault, though.

Mr HAERMEYER — Assault is something that I think we have slowed down the rate of increase in. I think we can turn that around. But also — -

Mr DAVIS — It is up 15 per cent on your figures.

Mr HAERMEYER — Let me say that I think assault also reflects domestic violence, which is very susceptible to the level of reporting rates as well. We have had a strong campaign to encourage people to report.

Mr DAVIS — Larceny is up 21 per cent on your figures, and that is not susceptible to reporting rates.

Mr HAERMEYER — Let me say that when you cut police numbers you get increases in crime. We had a hundreds of per cent increase in burglaries, in things like home invasions. In almost every category we have had a significant turnaround. There are still some areas of concern. There are also some areas where, because they are what you call detected crimes, by having a police presence on the ground you will have a higher incidence of that crime because the police are out there detecting it, whereas other crimes are what you call reported crimes, and we rely on people to come to us and report them. But we have had significant turnarounds in things that have been going up for years. That is not to say there isn't still work to be done. We have only just undone the damage that was done by the cutback of 800 police. Already we are starting to get very good results. I think we will get even better results as the full effect of that investment makes its presence known. But you cannot get crime rates down when you cut police numbers.

Mr DAVIS — On that set of figures, that exact set of figures — —

The CHAIRMAN — Ms Barker.

Ms BARKER — At the committee hearing last year you certainly outlined a vision for a whole-of-government approach to crime prevention that ties in obviously with the previous question. Today you referred again briefly to a whole-of-government approach to crime prevention during your presentation. You also mentioned local government. I am interested that you also mentioned businesses being involved in a whole-of-government approach.

I was pleased to attend a function at Glen Eira Rotary Club where Chief Commissioner Nixon spoke to local businesses about the work she would be undertaking in coming years. There was a very positive response from those local businesses, so I would be interested if you could inform the committee of some of the activities or programs that you have, given that you showed your commitment to this approach last year, and if you could explain what you have undertaken thus far. I am particularly interested in how you are going to develop a whole-of-government approach and how businesses would also be involved in that approach to crime prevention in Victoria.

Mr HAERMEYER — Certainly, I will be very glad to. As I say, last year we set up Crime Prevention Victoria, which is the crime prevention agency we indicated we would set up prior to the election. Its role is not necessarily to be directly involved hands on in the delivery of crime prevention programs but rather to coordinate crime prevention activity across a whole variety of fronts, particularly across government agencies. Earlier this year we announced an \$11.6 million initiative in terms of particular programs which will be piloted in various locations.

Some of the activity of Crime Prevention Victoria will be about getting other government agencies — whether it is health or community services — involved in dealing with some of the sorts of things that we believe are high contributors to crime. A lot of the best crime prevention initiatives that you can undertake are in those areas of education and community services, such as the middle years of schooling program and such as dealing with, in particular, young at-risk individuals, trying to identify them through schools, through community workers and

through police — and then trying to get those people the sort of assistance that is required and also providing assistance to their families.

Often you will find with young at-risk people, when you look back at it, that the families have problems or a lack of parenting skills. Part of it is dealing with those particular agencies, and part of it is providing guidance and resources to local governments and planning agencies in terms of trying to make our physical environment safer and doing safety audits, in particular, in communities — for example, if a spate of robberies, or whatever, take place at a particular railway station, do we need to improve lighting? Is there something we can do at that particular railway station or shopping centre to make that environment safer?

You particularly focused on businesses. I think that is important, because shopping centres in particular are places where young people congregate, and often they are areas where a lot of the thefts and drug activity take place and where shop stealing is also a problem. It is a direct problem for businesses if they are being stolen from or if they are having their windows broken, but it is also an indirect problem if a particular shopping centre or a neighbourhood has a bad name. It means that people do not go and shop there.

This is about getting business people involved in looking at their particular precinct, or their particular area, at what they can do to make their businesses less prone to crime and at what they can also do to reduce crime and improve the image of the particular shopping centre within which they operate. We will be working very closely with businesses, and retailers in particular, in identifying the particular problems that exist in their particular neighbourhoods, and that will help us turn those problems around.

Just as an indication — and Victoria Police has been actively involved on this front — I think one of the key areas that has been of concern in recent years has been the theft of and theft from cars. Frankston is one area that has had a particular problem with that. I know they have worked together with the local council and the local community, and they have had some dramatically successful results in improving safety at and around the railway station and the shopping centres where those thefts have been taking place. Perhaps the chief commissioner might want to expand.

Chief Comm. NIXON — If you take the Frankston example, it really is about the local community and local businesses looking at what the problems are and where the locations are that the motor vehicles are stolen from. If it is stealing from the motor vehicle, then it is also about giving some advice to people about not leaving those things in their cars. That kind of program in Frankston has been a great example, but there are many others across Victoria. It also starts at a state level with all of the agencies — the RACV, government agencies, Vicroads and others, as well as the insurance companies, which are very keen to work with us. So part of the focus on stolen motor vehicles is a very strong one. It is about looking at the legislative issues, the practical issues and the design of motor vehicles and immobilisation — and now you can have your car immobilised for less than \$100. We have been targeting people within Frankston and other areas who have the kinds of cars that are likely to be stolen and asking them to think about participating in the Immobilise Now program. That is a model for across the state, and I think over the next five to six months we will be able to see substantial reductions in motor vehicle theft as well as stealing from motor vehicles because of the kinds of programs in Frankston and other sorts of places, including Broadmeadows, where we are trialling these and then putting them into best practice in many other places.

Ms BARKER — Sounds great.

The CHAIRMAN — Minister, if I recall correctly when you were here last year you indicated that a priority in the emergency services area was the development of a statewide model of fire cover. Could you provide some information to this committee on the progress of the development of a statewide model of fire cover?

Mr HAERMEYER — Certainly, Mr Chairman. As I indicated, the statewide model of fire cover is about, I suppose, assessing the risks that exist in any particular area and what people have a right to expect of a fire service in their area. Sometimes it is easy to think of fire brigades as big red trucks that turn up when fires occur. But there is a lot more to it than that. I think that if you asked the fire brigades they would regard as the largest part of the work they do now and the most important part of the work they do now the fire awareness work and the fire prevention work that they do out there with the community.

The MFB has been very proactive, particularly in terms of getting residential and commercial property owners in high-risk locations in its area to reduce their exposure to fires. Over the years there has been a huge reduction in the number of fires there. The CFA has its community fire guard activities and its bushfire blitz, which is about raising the awareness of people, particularly out on the urban fringe and in regional areas, about the risk of fire and what they can do to protect their homes and properties against fire.

That sort of work is something that is not often seen; we always see the fire brigades turn out in their big red trucks. When we are doing a standard model of fire cover we have to look at the preventive side as well as the response side. The response side is very important, because if your property is on fire then you certainly want one of those big red trucks to be there very, very quickly so they can minimise the damage that occurs.

As I said, we have been going through an extensive consultation phase with not just the fire service agencies but local government. We had a discussion paper that was put out to the general community along with the CFA volunteers and with the firefighters union, and we have all those responses in. The Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner is now in the process of finalising its recommendations on that. We will then put those recommendations out for some further discussion, because this is a very serious matter. We need to make sure that we get it right, because it is about the exposure that any given community has to fire and other emergencies. It is going through an extensive consultation phase, but when it is out that will provide a benchmark that we will expect the fire services in any area of given risk to live up to. Now the fire services may do that differently. The CFA is a different agency to the MFB, and it has a different configuration of people to equipment. At the end of the day we do not care how they deliver it. We do not care about the badge on the side of the truck. We just want to be able to say, 'This is a standard of service that the community has a right to expect, and this is a standard of service that we expect the fire brigades to deliver'.

Mr DAVIS — Minister, I want to follow up the matter of crime statistics. I take you to page 187 of budget paper 3, where the government has stated the following targeted outcomes for 2002–03: 'A reduction in the incidence of violent crime in targeted areas', which you have referred to; and 'Maintain and enhance the confidence of Victorians in their personal safety and reduce their fear of crime', which you have also referred to. How do you intend to fulfil these commitments to reduce crime when in fact the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data on recorded crime for 2001 reveals soaring levels of crime, including homicide up by 18.2 per cent, robbery up by 34.5 per cent, driving causing death up by 33.3 per cent, assault up by 13.6 per cent, unlawful entry with intent up by 12.3 per cent, theft of motor vehicles up by 7.8 per cent and blackmail and extortion up by 48.7 per cent? They are the latest annual figures put out. They do not show a good picture at all. I wonder how you reconcile that with the targets that you put out in the budget.

Mr HAERMEYER — Let me firstly say that you need to use appropriate statistics for the appropriate circumstances. The ABS statistics are basically a limited statistical set that is used to compare states against each other. Once again Victoria is the lowest crime state of any, with crime rates below the national average. You referred to assaults — we have easily the lowest level of assaults — —

Mr DAVIS — As we have had for a long period.

Mr HAERMEYER — Anywhere in the country.

Mr DAVIS — Back in the 1990s — —

Mr HAERMEYER — Hold on, you asked a question and I am trying to answer it. The ABS figures are for the calendar year 2001 and as such they are historical; they reflect — —

Mr DAVIS — They are the latest.

Mr HAERMEYER — They are not the latest.

Mr DAVIS — Of the ABS series they certainly are.

Mr HAERMEYER — I think it is unfortunate that you did not show the same level of concern about rising crime when your government was cutting 800 members of the police force. What you are trying to do now is beat up a level of statistics that is a product of the cuts your government made to Victoria Police. What I have been citing here are the year-to-date statistics which will be confirmed in the final — —

Mr DAVIS — I have never heard of 10-month statistics before — it is a very unusual sample, 10 months. Will you release those to the opposition? You would not previously.

The CHAIRMAN — Minister and Mr Davis, can we return to having an answer to the question. If there is a clarification required, it can be asked at the end of the answer.

Mr HAERMEYER — I am glad to oblige. There are two sets of statistics and what we use to measure our year-to-year performance of crime rates are our official Victoria Police statistics. The ABS statistics are old

data; they are not up to date. The most up-to-date figures are the ones we have from Victoria Police. I am sure Mr Davis will find that even they are improved on by the time the full-year figures come out in a matter of months or even weeks. You will find that across most crime categories, particularly across areas such as aggravated burglary and robberies, there are significant turnarounds and significant reductions. That is an early return on the investment that we have made in Victoria Police. As I said, Victoria is a very safe place to be. Most of those crime categories are turning around and Victoria Police is developing strategies to focus on turning around those crime categories that are continuing to go up. Let me say that the first condition of dealing with crime in this state or any other place is ensuring that you have enough police out there to deal with it. There is nothing softer than cutting police numbers — there is no way of being softer on crime than cutting police numbers.

Mr DAVIS — On your actual statistics, the 10-month statistics you have referred to, it is a fact that homicide is up 16 per cent, assault is up 15 per cent, arson is up 21 per cent and, as you yourself referred earlier, reported knife attacks are increasing across all regions. Are you satisfied with the police commissioner's comments in the *Herald Sun* of 31 May where she said she was pleased to see an improvement in those figures? How do you reconcile that lift in the figures I have referred to with a pleased-to-see-an-improvement comment?

Mr HAERMEYER — You have been very selective there. Last year the chief commissioner identified that Victoria Police was targeting certain categories of crime that had been going up exponentially for many years and it has turned those around. Virtually without exception those areas are now on the decline. Those areas that you refer to that have — —

Mr DAVIS — Increased on your figures.

Mr HAERMEYER — In those areas that have increased you are actually seeing a slow down in their rate, but also there are categories that go up simply because you have numbers of police out there to detect them; they are detected crimes.

Mr DAVIS — You are not arguing that there is more crime when there are more police?

Mr HAERMEYER — In certain categories of crime the more police you have out there, the more that crime will be detected and the more it will be reflected in these figures.

Mr DAVIS — Just on those figures, would you make those available to the opposition in full?

Mr HAERMEYER — The final-year crime statistics will be made available not just to the — —

Mr DAVIS — Not them.

Mr HAERMEYER — This was put out and I am happy to — —

Mr DAVIS — It was made available to the government alone and not the opposition despite its seeking it.

Mr HAERMEYER — This was given to the media five or six weeks ago so I am happy for you to look at it. It is not a problem.

Mr HOLDING — I would like to ask a question which follows up some of the things you touched on in your answer about police numbers. It touches on the issue of morale, conditions of employment and operational safety in the police force. I would like to seek further information about some of the operational safety equipment improvements that have taken place over the past 12 months and particularly since you have become minister. You mentioned the ballistic vests, metal detectors and I think some vehicle screens, equipment belts and other things. Could you provide the committee with more information about those measures and the way they and other things that have occurred within the police force improve the occupational health and safety and Workcover environment for members?

Mr HAERMEYER — I touched upon earlier the fact that tenders are out on all of the various personal protective items I mentioned. I think we are soon to take delivery of the metal detectors and some 8600 ballistic vests. One of the problems with the ballistic vests in the past is while they were on offer they were very heavy and cumbersome and most police found them too impractical to use operationally. These are modern, lightweight, state-of-the-art ballistic vests that we hope will encourage a higher rate of usage by police members and make them safer from attack either by firearm or some other weapon. They are coming at a cost of about \$6 million. We have metal detectors. That is a \$200 000 buy of about 420 which will go out to operational units in strategically targeted areas.

The vehicle screens — police have to transport people from police stations to various other locations or between police stations and often that is not in the back of the divvy van but in the back of a patrol car. Having those people thump you on the back of the head or spit all over you is not a particularly safe way to be transporting those people. These are specially designed capsules that are fitted within the police car and provide safety for the police occupants in the front seat of the car. Increasingly we are asking police to carry a variety of things, not just night sticks — they carry guns, capsicum spray and a variety of other things. The lightweight equipment belts are about making that a bit more practical for their use as well.

The operational safety tactics and training facility is about giving police officers a realistic environment in which they can train for the sorts of circumstances they are likely to experience. It is not just a classroom exercise; it is a realistic environment — a street scenario or whatever — where they can deal with situations such as a person who is psychologically unstable waving around a knife, or with a potential siege situation. That will enhance the safety of our police force and it will enhance the safety of the community.

The most important thing is the additional police on the street. A few years ago we were sending police out there to operational scenes, often one up with backup half an hour or more away, and that is a totally untenable situation. We had a lot of police going off on stress leave as a result of the workloads and the stresses of the job. That has been substantially turned around now as a result of improved morale and some of the proactive activities that Victoria Police has taken.

The increase in numbers is also reflected in our attrition rate. At one stage Victoria Police had an attrition rate of 7.9 per cent; nearly 8 in every 100 police officers a year were walking. We have now got that down to 1.9 per cent. That is not just the lowest rate for any police force in Australia, it could also be the lowest for any police force in the world, and it is low by the standards of any work force let alone a high-stress occupation such as policing. I invite the chief commissioner to expand upon that.

Chief Comm. NIXON — In relation to improved morale, people feeling happier, feeling more supported and having more members around is an important part of that process. We have also reduced Workcover claims, which has meant a substantial drop in the number of claims and the cost of those claims, which of course allows us to manage our organisation in a far more effective manner. The provision of equipment in terms of better shoes, jumpers and polar-fleece jackets has meant that police working in cold-weather climates are now better equipped to deal with those kinds of conditions. They are the kinds of changes that are moving our organisation forward to be well equipped and to be able to deliver the policing service that the community requires.

Ms BARKER — We have looked at the overall vision and the commitment to this portfolio, but in terms of rural and regional Victoria you referred to the construction of the Morwell justice complex, for example, in the Latrobe Valley and construction of police stations in other areas of rural and regional Victoria. Could you provide us with some more detail on the work that is being undertaken in rural and regional Victoria to ensure that we have a whole-of-Victoria approach to policing and emergency services, and on the effect that any positive work being undertaken in those areas is having on local communities?

Mr HAERMEYER — I am certainly glad to do that. Firstly, I need to mention the country police station replacement program, because some of our accommodation out there in rural Victoria is absolutely abysmal, particularly in some of the smaller country towns. Some smaller towns are quite idyllic places and have no trouble getting police to go to them but others have a great deal of difficulty attracting and retaining police officers in those locations, so providing them with a modern police station and modern housing is very important in attracting and retaining police officers. The program is also about saying to that local community, ‘Your bank may have gone, and in years past the school, the local hospital and the railway station may have closed, but the police station is in this town to stay’.

We have 43 country police stations either being built or replaced, and a majority of those are small one-person or 16-hour stations in smaller towns. Also a number of regional locations have been growing and require 24-hour police presence, such as Bacchus Marsh, Moe, Seymour, Ocean Grove, Gisborne, Kilmore, Maryborough and Morwell. All of those locations are getting new 24-hour stations. Seymour, Maryborough and Morwell are existing 24-hour stations and the rest are upgrades. A new police station is going into Kinglake, which was a big black hole in terms of police presence. We used to have to get police from Yea, Seymour, Whittlesea, Epping or Diamond Creek to go to Kinglake, which was in each case a minimum of 25 minutes response time, so that new station is critically important.

In addition, the allocation of the 800 police across the state is an operational prerogative of Victoria Police which the chief commissioner oversees, but I know that country Victoria is certainly getting its share of those 800 police. Two or three years ago we had a situation where one-person police stations were being opened that did not have any police in them and had no hope of getting any police in them; those police stations are now staffed. A lot of country police stations were severely understaffed and they are now properly staffed.

The new booze buses are very much about enhancing road safety out there in country Victoria, in particular the four smaller ones, which are targeted at the needs of country Victorians. I have already mentioned the two helicopters and the improved response times they will give us, in particular in the more remote parts of rural Victoria.

One area that I should not leave untouched is the special training we are providing to police investigators to deal with livestock theft, which was an issue the Victorian Farmers Federation came to us about. They had some concerns after the livestock squad was disbanded under the previous administration, and a new group of specially trained investigators is now located out there in rural areas to deal with livestock theft as part of a general overview that the Minister for Agriculture and I commissioned into livestock theft. We are also in the throes of implementing a number of other recommendations of that livestock theft task force. All of that is about making country Victoria a lot safer as well.

Mr DAVIS — Just following up on Ms Barker's questions on country police stations, you mentioned Kilmore — I would like to know the date for that. I understand that Maryborough has been waiting for a considerable period of time, as have Rowville and Endeavour Hills. Can you give me some time lines on those and explain why there has been such a long delay in providing those four stations in particular?

Ms BARKER — It is a different question.

Mr DAVIS — It is not a different question. He mentioned Rowville.

Ms BARKER — It is a different question. Rowville and Endeavour Hills are different questions.

Mr DAVIS — I am interested in those.

The CHAIRMAN — The minister indicates he is pleased to answer the follow-on question.

Mr HAERMEYER — Mr Chairman, I am happy to answer that. Firstly, our police station delivery program is overwhelmingly on track and on budget, but we sometimes have issues with identifying appropriate locations for police stations. That has been particularly problematic in Maryborough, where some of the locations we would have liked to put a police station were subject last year to a significant flood and they now fall below the 100-year flood level, so that has taken almost 50 per cent of the available land in Maryborough — and certainly more than that in terms of the greenfields land available in Maryborough — out of circulation. I know that the local member, Joe Helper, has been very active in working with the local council in trying to identify a site. There is currently some negotiation going on around the council car park, and I am hopeful that will be resolved very shortly. As soon as that occurs we will be able to let tenders and to get construction happening on that.

As far as Kilmore is concerned, let me say that the strategic facilities review which was done under the previous government back in 1994 actually recommended the construction of a 24-hour police station in Kilmore. But what was in fact constructed was a small 16-hour station, not the 24-hour station that is required to service the massive growth area around Kilmore, Broadford and Seymour. So we have undertaken that and we have now acquired the site; we are into the planning phase, and we expect completion by June 2003.

Mr DAVIS — Rowville and Endeavour Hills?

Mr HAERMEYER — We are in the final stages of site acquisition at Rowville. As soon as that site is acquired the designs will be done. Again, I expect Rowville to be completed in the second half of next year.

We had a particular problem in Endeavour Hills. I want to thank the officers of the local council, who have been cooperative at all stages in helping us to acquire a site out there, but unfortunately some of the councillors and the local member out there have been frustrating, to say the least, to the stage of almost actively opposing it. We had a site that the police had identified as appropriate. We got strong opposition, despite assurances that the council was supportive. We then had some councillors vote against it and the local member running around collecting petitions against it, so we pulled it off line for a while. We are now privately negotiating with a particular land-holder and we

expect site acquisition to be completed relatively soon, and we expect a police station to be on the ground in the second half of next year.

The CHAIRMAN — Can I take you to an area of your responsibilities that is a fairly important one?

Mr DAVIS — I was just going to ask a question then.

The CHAIRMAN — That is my question.

Mr DAVIS — I am sorry.

The CHAIRMAN — I take you to an area which is an important part of your responsibilities, that of road safety and the road toll. You had some detail in your presentation related to that of a number of initiatives in the Arrive Alive strategy, and also further on where you talk about reducing Victoria's road toll and in particular the red light-green light campaign, and I think we can probably add in amber, which has recently become a signal to go faster. Could you detail for the committee not so much where the campaign is at, coming out of the Arrive Alive campaign, but what are the law enforcement strategies behind that which back up the Arrive Alive campaign and what are the sort of projected outcomes that you have for those law enforcement initiatives?

Mr HAERMEYER — Certainly. Let me say the Arrive Alive campaign has set itself a target of reducing road fatalities in this state by 20 per cent over a five-year period. That is a big order because you also have to bear in mind that we have a significant and steady increase in the number of cars on the road each year and the number of hours those cars spend on the roads, so the risk is going up. We have set ourselves that 20 per cent target, which sets 17 key challenges across a variety of areas, including enhanced crash information, speeding, improvement of safety around high-risk sites, drink-driving, fatigue, drugs and driving, occupant protection, post-crash trauma, young drivers' safety, older drivers' safety, pedestrian safety, motorcycle safety, bicycle safety, heavy vehicle safety, driver issues, working with the community and also the safety of public transport. I am happy to provide the documents to you, Mr Chairman, which go through that in some detail, but our particular focus is on the enforcement side.

As I have said, you can make the roads as safe as you like, you can provide as much education as you like, but if people continue to break the road rules, people will die. A number of campaigns are being worked on the enforcement side. The first is the Wipe Off 5 campaign. That is the notion that somehow you can drive 5, 10 or 15 clicks above the speed limit and get away with it. What we are trying to get across to people is that you drive at or below the limit, not at something that you think is a safe limit above it; that 60 means 60, 80 means 80 and 100 means 100. We anticipate that we can save in the vicinity of 93 lives if everybody heeds the message in the Wipe Off 5 campaign. To back that up, we have added police units out on the road, speed cameras and red light-green light cameras, which will now also pick up those people who think that the amber light is the sign to pick up your acceleration to beat the lights. It is not; it is the sign to hit the brakes, and it is unfortunate that some people think there is only one pedal in their car and that is the accelerator. There are two pedals, and the brake is one that should be used more often than people do.

Mr DAVIS — Some cars even have three! I thought I would make that point for you, just in case you have not driven recently, Minister.

Mr HAERMEYER — I had occasion to drive a left-hand drive manual through Europe not so long ago.

We also have to tackle drink-driving. Unfortunately the message which we had ingrained into the culture is starting to fade away a bit, and some of the old habits are starting to creep back. So the new booze buses, the four country and the seven larger booze buses, will help us to enforce that message. Back in the late 1980s we had some significant trouble putting booze buses on the road because we did not have the police to staff them, so we now have an all-out effort out there. If drivers will not voluntarily obey the road rules then they will cop some very severe penalties.

I want to deal with this suggestion that somehow road rule enforcement is about revenue raising. Road trauma costs us in excess of \$1 billion a year. The amount of money that we pour into dealing with road safety — the amount of money that goes into providing road accident rescue services, ambulance services, law enforcement, better roads — all of that — dwarfs the amount of money that we get for enforcement. From our perspective it is better for the government coffers if people do not give us that revenue and if they drive within the limits because that \$1 billion a year is a mountain compared to the molehill we get out of the fines. The fines are there as a deterrent. They are there to get people to slow down. We want people to slow down, not just where they think the cameras are, not just

to assume that that they are automatically going to know where there is a speed camera or where there is a booze bus. We want them to understand that if they speed, if they drink-drive, they will get caught, and that applies on every road all of the time.

Mr DAVIS — Minister, I want to return to budget paper 3 on page 200, where the police investigative activity on illegal drug activity is expected to fall 40 000 hours lower than was budgeted in 2001–02. Relating to that revelation in the state budget, you have outlined some comments about the level of drug activity. I wish to refer you to the research report dated January 2002 by the commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing that evaluates the government's launch phase of the \$625 million national illicit drug program. The report reveals that a recent survey found 43 per cent of parents perceived illegal drugs to be the main social problem facing young people in Australia today, compared to only 14 per cent who viewed unemployment as the most serious problem. Having regard to the fact that parents and the general community are obviously seriously concerned by the drug scourge affecting society and particularly the devastating effect that drugs certainly still have on our youth, how can you as minister ever justify or support a reduction in police resources being directed at that illegal drug activity?

Mr HAERMEYER — Let me firstly say there has been no greater reduction in police resources than when — if you actually work out the number of hours involved when you take 800 police out of a police force and the effect that that has across police activities across the border, that is absolutely devastating. The allocation of those resources is a matter for the Victoria Police to establish according to their own priorities. The drug — —

Mr DAVIS — The question is whether you support it.

Mr HAERMEYER — Hold on. On the issue of allocation of resources to drug activity, the chief commissioner told you before, firstly, we have a question about the actual reliability of these figures because the surveys used to reach these figures last year were based on one sample, where normally they are based on two. Let me also say that, in terms of drug activity, police respond to the actual level of drug activity out there on the street. I cited you the year-to-date drug offences: drug cultivation, manufacturing and trafficking, down 21.3; drug possession and use, down 9.6. Police will respond to priorities as required. I think not just in Victoria but you will find across Australia there is a reduced prevalence of illicit drugs and it is up to the police to determine what level of resources is required to deal with the problem. Are you then saying that even though the prevalence of drug trafficking and illicit drug activity on the streets is going down, police should step up the level of resources that are being applied to that, at the expense of things like home robberies or assaults or anything else? The police have to allocate resources as required. Again I say to you there are more hours and more resources going to all of these areas across the board than there were three years ago: 800 police multiplied by a police working week is a helluva lot of hours.

Mr DAVIS — Can I just take to a recent *Age* article which referred to a resurgence in street heroin — a very recent one, in May this year — that could be seen in the city, Box Hill, Dandenong and Frankston. There is some fluctuation in levels of certain drugs out in the community obviously, but it is very important to maintain the effort and resources of the force into these areas. I put it to you that most in the community, including most parents, would want to see that that level of resources is actually maintained and continued, not reduced as the budget papers show.

Mr HAERMEYER — As I say, we have actually increased resources across the board for police to apply. We came into a situation where 800 — you multiply out 800 — —

Mr DAVIS — I am talking about your figures.

The CHAIRMAN — Just a moment. We will still proceed by question and answer, rather than interruption.

Mr HAERMEYER — I would invite you to multiply out 800 police times the number of hours that every police officer contributes to the community each year and see what was lost by that cut of 800 police. There are now more police out there doing more work across the board than was the case three years ago. However, from year to year you will have fluctuations in focus. If drug activity goes down, you would have the right to expect that the amount of hours committed by police to drug activity goes down also and is dedicated to other areas. That is a matter for the police to determine as they see fit, in terms of responding to crime levels as they occur. If drug activity goes up, I have no doubt that the chief commissioner and the people she delegates will ensure that the appropriate level of resources is there to respond to it.

Mr DAVIS — So you in fact support that removal of resources from that area?

Mr HAERMEYER — There is no removal of resources.

The CHAIRMAN — Minister, perhaps if I can have a clarifying follow up on that question because I may be reading these figures wrongly. If you compare actual to expected outcome, you actually have an — albeit small — increase in the resources applied from 2000–01 to 2001–02. If you go to your outcome measures, the quality and timeliness ones, your expectation is that the proportion of all recorded drug offences resolved will be at the same level of 98 per cent, as it has been previously; and your proportion of all reported offences resolved within 90 days will be at 91 per cent, as it has been previously. Am I misreading the figures?

Mr HAERMEYER — No, you are absolutely correct, Mr Chairman. Let me say what we are talking about here is a target for this year that is based on the actual for last year and that was driven by demand. If there is a perceived need to increase, then that will be done. Let me say that the difference in the total hours of investigation — —

Mr DAVIS — Forty thousand hours.

Mr HAERMEYER — Is 40 000. Can I just say that the number of additional hours provided per annum by 800 additional police is around 1.28 million; 40 000 is a drop in the bucket. That is compared to last year, not compared to when we had 800 police less. There are far more resources available to police to do this task and to do any other task that they require than there were three years ago. That is what I am concerned about. I think that is vindicated by the crime rates I referred to earlier.

Mr HOLDING — Minister, I ask you about Country Fire Authority funding and specifically the findings that arose from the Linton coronial inquest that was conducted in January this year. Can you identify the additional resources that have been made available for the CFA in this budget, and the extent to which those additional resources reflect the findings of the coronial inquest?

Mr HAERMEYER — The first thing we need say about the coronial inquest is that we have had in Victoria some fairly catastrophic fires over the years. The Ash Wednesday fires led to a number of firefighters coming to grief. As a result of the lessons we learnt from those fires, improvements were made. I have no doubt that, regrettably and sadly, some time in the future something else will happen that we will try to foresee but cannot, and we will have to learn from that and do better.

With Linton there were obviously some problems that were identified by the coronial inquest, particularly in relation to operational protocols, communications between the two fire services — the Department of Natural Resources and Environment and the CFA — and also in relation to the training of firefighters. The CFA and the government were very keen to be not just waiting for the outcome of the Linton inquiry, which was delivered some more than two years after the actual event, but to be on the front foot and try to identify what we could try to pre-empt the coroner and do what could be done ahead of those findings.

That is what gave rise to the strategic resource initiative. That was about providing better training to CFA firefighters across the board, and that is progressively occurring particularly in bushfire fighting. The CFA's volunteers, in addition to the career forest firefighters in the DNRE, are our front line against bushfires in Victoria. In the past they have received very little training in bushfire fighting. Their training was predominantly in grassfire fighting and some degree of structure firefighting.

We have lifted the training standards. They are now trained to national competency standards. They will not be involved in bushfire fighting until they achieve the necessary competencies. The training across the board has been lifted. The equipment levels have been lifted. We also are undertaking a revamp of our emergency services communications system through the statewide public alerting system.

You may be aware that Telstra has announced it was getting out of the paging business. The pagers are the vehicle through which we communicate and through which we dispatch volunteer emergency services in rural Victoria. The Telstra service used to give us about a 65 per cent coverage. Once it pulled out we were left with two other providers that were not interested in maintaining that level of coverage because it was not cost effective for them. That left us no option but to establish our own dedicated statewide public alerting system, to which we have allocated notionally around \$100 million to put into place.

Those pagers will give us coverage of between 85 per cent and 95 per cent of rural Victoria in areas that previously were not covered by the Telstra network, including areas like Linton. The big thing at Linton was the wind change and the fact that that particular crew was not notified of or was not aware of the wind change, so by having the

paggers in that area where paggers have not been operative they would have been able to be made aware of that wind change. All of those things will contribute.

In addition, the CFA and the DNRE have been working very cooperatively and constructively in going through the recommendations of the coroner to pick up on those areas that they had not anticipated and those areas where they think further work needs to be done. That will certainly make our firefighters in the future a lot safer in a very dangerous job. That is not to say they will not face some fairly treacherous dangers in the future. Firefighting is by its nature inherently dangerous. I suppose our job is to give them the best possible training and equipment to minimise those dangers.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time allocated for consideration of the portfolio areas for which you have responsibility. I thank you, the chief commissioner and various departmental officers for their attendance at the hearings today. There were a couple of matters that the committee will follow up with you that arose from today's hearings and there may be some other questions in writing that will be forwarded to you later.

Committee adjourned.