



**THE POLICE
ASSOCIATION
VICTORIA**

Submission to Inquiry into Ambulance Victoria

December, 2024



Protect. Support. Advance.

Submission to the Inquiry into Ambulance Victoria

The Police Association of Victoria (the Association) thanks the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to address questions in the Inquiry into Ambulance Victoria.

The Police Association of Victoria

The Association is an organisation that exists to advance and represent the industrial, legal, professional and welfare interests of its members. The Association's membership of over 17,500 is drawn exclusively from sworn Police Officers at any rank, Protective Services Officers, Police Reservists and Police Recruits who serve in Victoria Police. Membership of the Association is voluntary. By virtue of its constitution, the Association is not affiliated with any political party.

Room for the Victoria Government to Do More

Emergency service workers (ESWs), including police officers and paramedics, operate in increasingly high-pressure environments characterised by rising expectations, heavy workloads

Police officers are increasingly on the front lines of mental health crises, often diverted from their core responsibilities to transport individuals to hospital for mental health assessments. The *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022* (Section 232(1)) designated registered paramedics as authorised persons to assume care and control of individuals during these mental health crises. However, the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Amendment Act 2023* revoked this designation, removing paramedics from the list of authorised persons. This decision has significantly increased the burden on police, forcing them to act as the primary responders in mental health emergencies. The result is further strain on already overstretched police resources, undermining their ability to effectively respond to the community's needs.

A 2022 study by the University of Melbourne highlights a significant issue: 67% of police and ambulance co-transport incidents involving mental health cases in the study were primarily due to self-harm risk or intent¹. Concerningly, there are no standardised protocols or effective communication systems between police and medical personnel. This gap leads to significant misunderstandings regarding the severity of individuals' mental health crises, often resulting in their premature release, despite police assessments indicating a clear need for further care.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System in 2019 investigated a broad range of issues associated with mental health in the Victorian Community. Of relevance, with respect to police intervention, they found there is an over-reliance on police responding to mental health crises largely due to insufficient mental health service infrastructure. Despite options for dispatching either police or ambulances to mental health incidents, current protocols lead police to respond to the majority of cases, especially when there is a perceived

¹ Ward, B., Kollios, J., Smith, F., Klim, S., Senz, A., & Kelly, A. M. (2022). Characteristics and outcome of patients transported by police to emergency departments under section 351 of the Mental Health Act 2014 (Vic). *Emergency Medicine Australasia*, 34(2), 263-270.

risk of harm. The overuse of police in responding to what is ostensibly a health crisis, has demonstrably led to adverse outcomes for many patients dealt with by police as opposed to health intervention.

As submitted to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Victoria Police reported in their submission that in the 2017-18 financial year, they responded to a mental health-related call-out roughly every 12 minutes². Alarming, officers sometimes had to wait over six hours in emergency rooms before a patient could be seen³.

This situation led the Royal Commission to propose key reforms to reduce police involvement and instead strengthen emergency response capabilities within the mental health sector.

Recommendation 10 of the Royal Commission's Final Report calls for a shift towards a health-led response, with Ambulance Victoria taking the lead on mental health crisis calls, except in cases where safety concerns require police presence.

On 2 March 2021, then Premier of Victoria Daniel Andrews announced the Victorian State Government accepted all 65 recommendations in the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System Final Report. The Premier pledged to immediately build a comprehensive mental health system "from the ground up" that provides care when and where Victorians need it⁴. The former Premier commented specifically in relation to health-led responses, saying his government was committed to moving away from crisis-driven care by investing in early intervention, community-based support and a system that prevents people from "falling through the cracks"⁵.

Despite this strong commitment, significant procedural changes necessary for transitioning to the recommended health-led response have yet to be implemented. While legislative reforms were slated to facilitate this shift starting September 1, 2024, the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Amendment Act 2023* removed the inclusion of paramedics as first responders in mental health cases. This adjustment was made over concerns that the current workforce is not sufficiently prepared to handle these responsibilities effectively. This delay hinders the establishment of a fully health-centered model for responding to mental health emergencies.

Additionally, despite outlining critical issues identified in the Royal Commission's Final Report, the Government's response is disappointingly vague, lacking specific implementation timelines and concrete details about proposed reforms. While funding has been allocated to initiatives such as enhanced training for first responders and new telehealth communication projects⁶, we are aware of no clear schedule or measurable outcomes associated with these efforts that would positively impact police. This lack of clarity raises serious concerns about

² Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. (2021). *Victoria Police: Evidence* [PDF]. Retrieved from https://rcvmhs.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Victoria_Police.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ Andrews, D. (2021, February 12). *Statement from the Premier*. Victoria State Government. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/statement-premier-88>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Victorian Government. (2024, October 10). *Recommendation 10: A new approach to mental health services*. <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-reform/recommendation-10>

the Government's capacity to execute the reforms. It is imperative that the Government provides an expedient and actionable plan to ensure meaningful progress, particularly as it impacts the transition of responses from Victoria Police to Ambulance Victoria.

This failure to act has forced Victoria Police officers to continue fulfilling roles that they have been found to be ill-equipped for and that should be undertaken by health professionals, placing further unnecessary strain on police resources and jeopardising community safety.

In addition, representative of Ambulance Victoria Employees reported to TPAV that an ongoing lack of information sharing between the two agencies particularly relating to warning flags attached to a person or premises provide risk to paramedics. TPAV is supportive of their desire to see all first responders provided with as much information as possible, in order to effectively risk assess responses and seek support from police where required and appropriate.

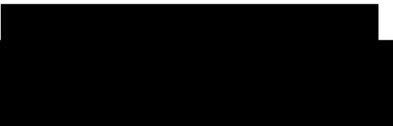
The ongoing delay in transferring primacy for these responses to health, represents a clear failure to prioritise patients and public safety.

Recommendations

The Association recommends the following actions:

- That the Government resources Ambulance Victoria to ensure timely implementation of recommendation 10 of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System consistent with its commitment following the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health.
- That the Government addresses concerns advised by Ambulance employee representatives that identify barriers to effective information sharing.

For Consideration,



Mr. Wayne Gatt
Secretary
The Police Association of Victoria
70 Jolimont Street
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Phone: 9468 2600
Email: general@tpav.org.au

