



Ambulance Employees Association WA

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Hon. Paul Papalia CSC, MLA

Minister for Police; Corrective Services; Racing and Gaming; Defence Industry; Veterans Issues

10th Floor, Dumas House,

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By email: paul.papalia@mp.wa.gov.au

Requests for WA Police Assistance by SJA (St John Ambulance) in 'Non-Police Related' Incidents

Dear Minister,

I write to you on behalf of the Ambulance Employees Association WA (AEAWA) in relation to the recent changes to the way WA Police respond to requests for assistance from St John personnel.

The AEAWA represents the majority of front line operational employees within the ambulance industry in Western Australia, including Paramedics, Patient Transport Officers, State Operations Centre Communications Officers and Emergency Medical Dispatchers.

As Minister for Police you will be aware that effective 1st December 2023, all requests for WA Police assistance by St John Ambulance (SJA) are now subject to rigorous assessment and management by the Police Assistance Centre (PAC) and Police Operations Centre (POC).

You will also be aware that WA Police initiated the removal of nearly 800 location and person based warnings from SJA's own systems; warnings which had been put in place internally due to documented incidences of violence and aggression.

These two initiatives mean:

- a) WA Police (POC) routinely refuse to send support St John personnel when requested
- b) St John ambulance personnel will be entering high risk locations without any advance CAD warning

Many of the location warnings were put in place as a direct result of a person at the address exhibiting threatening, aggressive or violent behaviors toward our frontline members. Often such behaviours may be due to either chronic substance abuse and/or severe anti-social behaviour traits or poorly controlled psychiatric conditions. Our members, having no access to police data, relied solely on our internally generated warnings, created in response to actual incidences involving our frontline healthcare professionals. It is therefore concerning that WA Police, based on their own criteria, have determined it appropriate to **remove 50% of our location warnings**. While we acknowledge it was completely reasonable to update and remove some warnings (where a person was no longer resident at an address, or who was now deceased etc.) many, many others have been removed where a high risk individual still resides at a location.

The AEAWA consider it wholly inappropriate for WA Police management to interfere with legitimately created internal safety warnings belonging to another organisation, and to assess risks as being 'acceptable' for a workforce whom they

do not control, do not employ and do not have duty of care obligations in respect of the Work Health and Safety Act 2020 (WHS Act).

WA Police management will undoubtedly have a different perspective on what constitutes an acceptable level of risk. This is because their officers are trained specifically to manage high-risk situations and have training in police personal protective techniques and empty hand tactics. They have access to up-to-date information on the residents at a location, their known associates and their criminal record history. Their officers also have protective clothing, body armour, a service pistol, pepper spray, a telescopic baton and handcuffs, and access to backup. Often, individuals who may be prone to acts of violence and aggression or sexual harassment towards ambulance officers, often choose to moderate their behaviour in the presence of police and so may falsely appear to police to be 'low risk'. What constitutes acceptable risk to one emergency service may not translate well to another.

These process changes appear to be initiated to combat media scrutiny over WA Police response decisions, but simply provide a 'Band-Aid' solution to conceal the real issue of chronic under-resourcing and under-funding of WA Police. Providing a co-response with fellow emergency service in managing high risk persons should not be dismissed as 'non-police related' or 'non-police core business'. The fact that such an action was deemed necessary to manage workload by senior figures within WA Police, should be sound an alarm for the Minister. Emergency services should work together while striving to serve the community, and certainly one service should not take steps to sabotage the safety systems of another emergency service due to their own response time issues.

The AEWAW recognize that WA Police often face competing and simultaneous demands on their services. Ambulance services do also, utilizing a structured triage process to aid in managing competing demand. Should WA Police be unable to attend to calls for urgent assistance from the public, as well as provide assistance and support to other emergency services, then perhaps the real issue is not co-response with ambulance, but excessive administrative duties, inadequate growth in numbers of police officers and well publicised poor levels of staff retention (noting a record 465 sworn officers resigned in 2022 alone).

In addition to the issue of location warnings, is the issue of appropriate management of mental health conditions. The ambulance service and police are regularly called to acute psychiatric emergencies where a person is threatening suicide, or who is exhibiting acutely disturbed and abnormal behaviour, and who by their behaviour or statements make it known that they will refuse voluntary admission to hospital. Often, these situations are complicated and compounded by illicit substance use.

Frequently, callers to 000 will request the police in the first instance, given that erratic behaviour is the callers primary concern, but WA Police will re-direct such calls to St John claiming them to be a 'health matter'. **In such cases, it is critical to note that pre-hospital emergency care providers have no legal authority under the Mental Health Act 2014 (WA) to detain or apprehend such an individual for their own safety.** It is reasonable to assume also, that such a person who is suffering an acute disturbance of thought may behave unpredictably should emergency services arrive at their home. Since 1st December 2023, WA Police have refused to attend many such instances, again putting out members in dangerous situations.

The Chief Psychiatrist (WA) practice document "*Clinicians' Practice Guide to the Mental Health Act 2014*" is clear on which 'prescribed persons' have authority under the Act. The document states "***The role of the police officer is significant for ensuring the safety of people experiencing mental illness in the community***". It notes at s. 156; "*A police officer may apprehend a person they suspect is experiencing mental illness in order to protect the health and safety of that person, the safety of another person or prevent the person causing or continuing to cause serious damage to property (s. 156 Apprehension by police officer of person suspected of having mental illness)*".

The term 'ambulance', 'ambulance officer', 'paramedic' (or any equivalent) are not present anywhere in the Mental Health Act (2014) or the associated Regulations.

The ambulance service and its employees have no authority to apprehend or restrain involuntary persons. Historically, such psychiatric emergencies were jointly responded with police and ambulance, however this new initiative by WA police leadership has seen POC refusing to send a unit to many of these situations, believing them to be a 'non-police related' or a 'health related matter'. We believe there is an understanding of the relevant legislation, but it does appear to suggest a disregard for a core legislative function of the police, disregard for the safety of our members, and importantly, the safety of the at risk persons.

This refusal to attend not only puts at risk the safety of front line healthcare workers, but also the safety of vulnerable members of the public who experience mental illness.

The WA Police position is that they will attend only when there is “*real-time evidence of current risk to ambulance crews*”, and they seem to actively avoid any ‘non police related’ matters. What this means in practice is that WA Police will not attend until St John personnel have entered a scene and made contact with the persons at the address. ‘Real time risk’ would imply actively under threat where ambulance employees are expected to be the canary in the coal mine. This, depending on the situation can clearly expose our members to unacceptable, high-risk of injury or abuse. In relation to ‘non police related matters’ our members can assure you that in the majority of situations where a warning was placed, there is a history of illicit substance use and possession, threatening behaviour and violence, sexual harassment and intimidation, and often concealed weapons or prohibited weapons, all of which should be considered ‘police related matters’.

We urge you as Minister for Police to re-evaluate the wisdom of this latest initiative. Ambulance workers are health care professionals and should not be expected to face violence and aggression while performing their job. The AEAWA will not allow our members to be injured as a result of removed location warnings or WA Police refusal to attend, and we will seek to highlight any and all such incidences at every possible opportunity so that the public are made aware of how under-resourced the WA Police force currently are, and how ambulance workers are being left to fend for themselves in managing violence and aggression, and used to mop up issues created by the inefficient, ineffective and neglected mental health system in Western Australia.

Should you wish to discuss our concerns further, we welcome correspondence but remain open to meeting in person.

Kind regards

John Thomas

AEAWE President

On behalf of the Executive Committee

Ambulance Employees Association of WA