

# POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUNG ADULT FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE VOLUNTEERS

## A WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

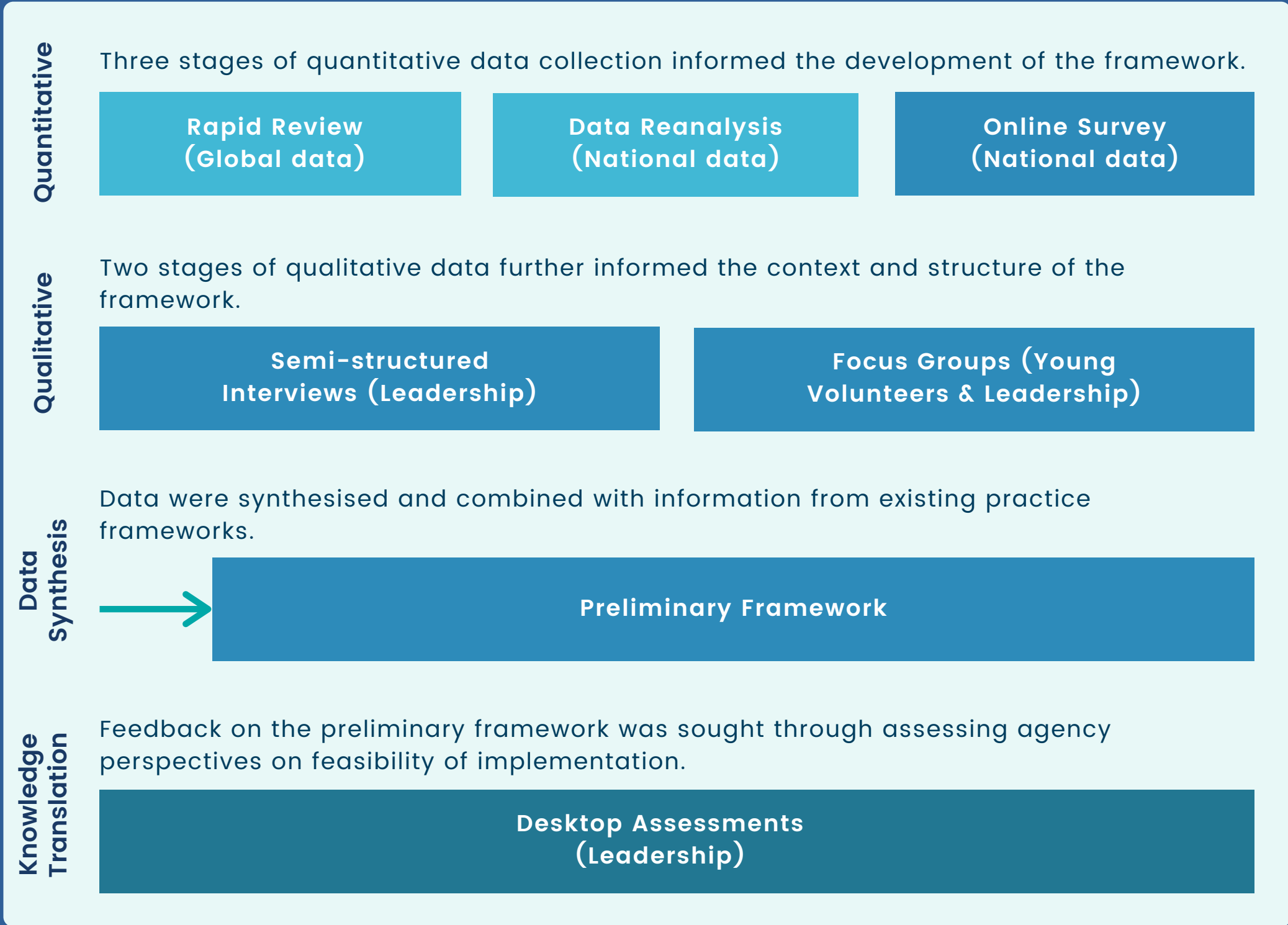
### INTRODUCTION

Mental health and wellbeing among fire and emergency service volunteers is a stated priority across all Australian agencies (Beyond Blue, 2018; Varker et al., 2018). Support for young adults in particular has become a focus given longer anticipated years of service and the cumulative impact of exposure on mental health (McGorry & Mei, 2018). Mental health support is often focussed on intervention following exposure. However, positive health promotion and prevention initiatives provide the opportunity to minimise risk factors for young volunteers before exposure and impact (McGorry & Mei, 2018).

The aim of the present study was therefore to develop an understanding of mental health outcomes and support needs for young adult fire and emergency service personnel, and develop resources that are data driven for this young adult cohort and informed by best practice guidelines (Beyond Blue, 2016). It was expected that these resources – targeted at both agency level and young volunteers – would be translatable and feasible for use across different fire and emergency service agency contexts, and provide a practical approach to supporting and maintaining positive mental health for young volunteers and personnel.

### METHODS and KEY RESULTS

#### Mixed Methods



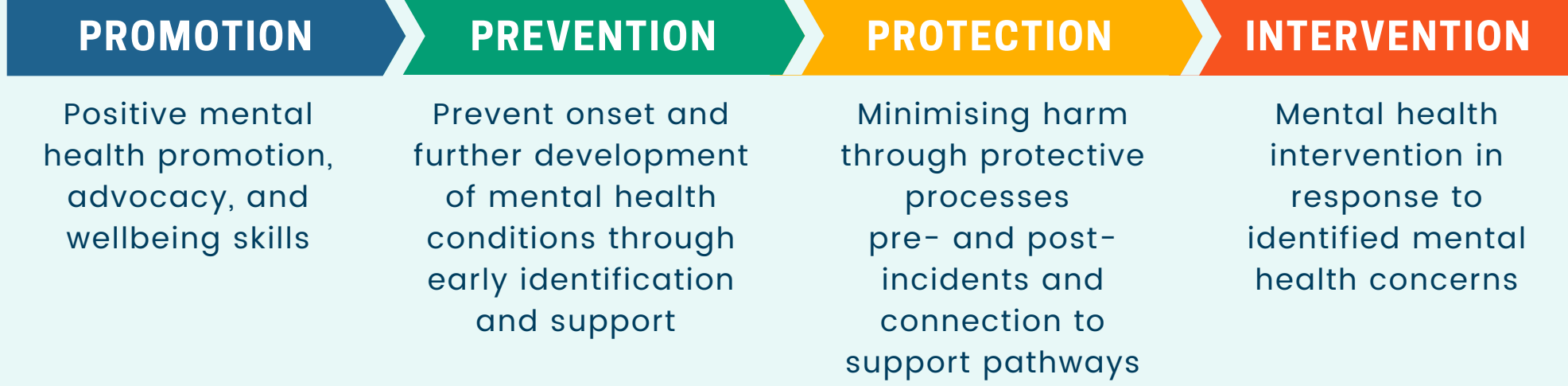
#### Key Results

- Mental Health Outcomes**
  - Young volunteers reported high levels of psychological distress and high wellbeing
  - Self-compassion, mindfulness, and the use of engaged coping strategies were associated with improved mental health among young volunteers
  - Disengaged (or avoidant) coping strategies were associated with increased risk for mental health concerns for young volunteers
- Young Volunteer and Leadership Perspectives**
  - Support and priority for mental health existed across all levels of the agencies
  - Despite the priority, mental health-related stigma remained present across many units, particularly for older personnel
  - Approaches to mental health within agencies were predominantly reactive rather than functioning proactively
  - There is less of a focus on promoting positive mental health

### KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION

#### Wellbeing Framework

##### Four integrated pillars of support



##### Three contexts of change

- CULTURE**

Organisational culture and psychosocial environment from agency level through to unit level.
- COMMUNICATION**

Resources and materials that young adult volunteers, and those that support them, can access, and protocols to increase their visibility.
- CAPACITY BUILDING**

Training and engagement of young adult volunteers to develop skills for positive mental health and wellbeing, protocols to facilitate learning, and how they can be supported to do this by others.

#### Agency Implementation Guide

WELLBEING PILLAR 2: PREVENTION		
GOALS	ACTIONS	INDICATORS
CULTURE	<b>To increase visibility of support seeking pathways and normalise support seeking</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Normalise mental health needs and promote support seeking pathways, including agency specific wellbeing teams and social media</li><li>Include consideration of diversity and inclusion in communications relating to mental health, and whether accommodations are required</li></ol>	<b>To increase awareness of mental health concerns through communications, materials, and resources</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Share targeted components ('shareables') of the 'Care 4 Guide', with a focus on identifying support needs, when to seek support, and pathways to care, regularly through social media channels</li><li>Encourage leadership personnel to discuss the range of informal and formal supports available with young volunteers for inclusion on the support pathways template</li><li>Utilise inclusive language which is sensitive to diversity in agency, brigade, and unit communications</li><li>Consider diverse access needs and provide accommodations to enable accessibility of information, training, and resources</li></ol>
	<b>To increase awareness of skills for prevention of mental health concerns through communications, materials, and resources</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide access to and promote identification of early signs of mental health symptoms and avenues for seeking mental health support</li><li>Incorporate and disseminate the information in the 'Care 4 Guide' across all communication platforms, including agency specific wellbeing teams and social media, to increase exposure</li></ol>	<b>To facilitate access to and foster transfer of knowledge and skills for prevention of mental health concerns through training and activities</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Make the 'Care 4 Guide' available and accessible electronically on local unit/agency resources, and in hard copy at each local unit</li><li>Provide each new volunteer with a hard copy of the 'Care 4 Guide' at recruitment/induction, and ensure that they know how to access it digitally</li><li>Promote 'check-in with yourself' shareable from the 'Care 4 Guide'</li></ol>
COMMUNICATION	<b>To facilitate access to and foster transfer of knowledge and skills for prevention of mental health concerns through training and activities</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide access to training which will promote skills and strategies relating to protective mental health</li><li>Provide psychoeducation during recruitment and induction about potential mental health risks of being an emergency service volunteer including cumulative trauma exposure, and the importance of early intervention if symptoms arise</li></ol>	<b>To ensure that conversations with potential new recruits include discussion of the potential for exposure to traumatic experiences and associated risk for mental health issues, and to have copy of each local unit</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Make the 'Care 4 Guide' available and accessible electronically on local unit/agency resources, and in hard copy at each local unit</li><li>Provide each new volunteer with a copy of the 'Care 4 Guide' at recruitment/induction</li><li>Reminders to be sent to operational leaders to ensure that all young volunteers are aware of and can access the 'Care 4 Guide'</li><li>Incorporate with training activities from the 'Care 4 Guide' into induction, training, and regular unit activities</li></ol>
CAPACITY BUILDING	<b>To facilitate access to and foster transfer of knowledge and skills for prevention of mental health concerns through training and activities</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide leadership personnel with training in mental health first aid principles in induction, training, and unit activities by inviting trained leadership personnel to share knowledge</li><li>Develop and implement protocol for a regular check-in with young volunteers, that is not necessarily linked to incidents</li></ol>	<b>To ensure that conversations with potential new recruits include discussion of the potential for exposure to traumatic experiences and associated risk for mental health issues, and to have copy of each local unit</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Make the 'Care 4 Guide' available and accessible electronically on local unit/agency resources, and in hard copy at each local unit</li><li>Provide each new volunteer with a copy of the 'Care 4 Guide' at recruitment/induction</li><li>Reminders to be sent to operational leaders to ensure that all young volunteers are aware of and can access the 'Care 4 Guide'</li><li>Incorporate with training activities from the 'Care 4 Guide' into induction, training, and regular unit activities</li></ol>
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### WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

#### Wellbeing Framework

The Beyond Blue 'Good practice model for mental health and wellbeing in first responder organisations' provided the best practice foundation that informed this framework (Beyond Blue, 2016). The suggestions provided in the framework are intended as a 'best practice' guide for agencies to support practices already in place or offer options to shift practices to promote and maintain young volunteer mental health.

The 'Care 4 Guide' was co-designed with the Young Volunteers Advisory Committee members and acts as the primary mental health content referred to in the framework and this implementation guide.

#### Agency Implementation Guide

The Agency Implementation Guide (AIG) provides additional detail and guidance to assist agencies to implement the Wellbeing Framework. This includes measurable steps that can readily inform an evaluation strategy, to be developed and implemented at the agency level.

For each of the goals and actions in the framework, this guide provides several targeted strategies–implementation indicators–to address the actions. These indicators are intended as exemplar guides and may need to be adapted at the agency or unit level to complement existing frameworks, protocols and documentation. Further, each individual agency may choose to implement additional strategies to increase the relevance and uptake for their young volunteers.

#### A WELLBEING FRAMEWORK for Young Adult Fire and Emergency Service Volunteers

	PROMOTION	PREVENTION	PROTECTION	INTERVENTION
CULTURE	<b>GOAL:</b> To decrease mental health stigma and increase visibility of and normalise positive mental health skills as part of the volunteer role <b>Action 1:</b> Incorporate lived experience stories in organisational messaging to share and promote the benefits of mental health services, seeking support, and positive outcomes, to promote sustainable volunteering <b>Action 2:</b> Develop and communicate a 'mental safety' in volunteer roles being inclusive of psychosocial safety <b>Action 3:</b> Agencies to develop young volunteer representative groups or committees to provide young volunteers the opportunity to advise on agency processes and policies, including those related to mental health.	<b>GOAL:</b> To increase visibility of support seeking pathways and normalise support seeking <b>Action 1:</b> Normalise mental health needs and promote support seeking pathways across all communication channels including agency specific wellbeing teams and social media <b>Action 2:</b> Include consideration of diversity and inclusion in communications relating to mental health, and whether accommodations are required	<b>GOAL:</b> To increase awareness and discussion of mental health in pre- and post-incident settings <b>Action 1:</b> Incorporate mental health prompts in pre- and post-incident debriefing protocols <b>Action 2:</b> Include consideration of diversity and inclusion in protocols and supports relating to mental health, and whether accommodations are required	<b>GOAL:</b> To decrease stigma and increase visibility of mental health as a priority <b>Action 1:</b> Promote agency-wide discussion and visibility of mental health, promotion of support seeking, and services available, across all levels of personnel <b>Action 2:</b> Agencies to introduce framework and visibly promote a commitment to implementing the actions outlined
COMMUNICATION	<b>GOAL:</b> To increase awareness of positive mental health skills through communications, materials, and resources <b>Action 1:</b> Provide access to and promote the knowledge product across all communication platforms, to increase awareness and knowledge relating to positive mental health skills <b>Action 2:</b> Nominate 'Wellbeing Champions' to advocate for positive mental health by providing information, disseminating messaging, and linking to resources through a variety of communication channels including social media	<b>GOAL:</b> To increase awareness of skills for prevention of mental health concerns through communications, materials, and resources <b>Action 1:</b> Provide access to and promote existing resources to support identification of early signs of mental health symptoms and avenues for seeking mental health support <b>Action 2:</b> Incorporate and disseminate the information in the knowledge product across all communication platforms, including agency specific wellbeing teams and social media, to increase exposure	<b>GOAL:</b> To improve awareness of protective strategies for mental health relating to attending incidents <b>Action 1:</b> Provide access to and promote the self-check-in for individual reflection pre & post incident included in the knowledge product <b>Action 2:</b> Young volunteers to be made aware of and know how to contact peer support before attending their first incident <b>Action 3:</b> Post-incident debriefing protocol to include: mental health check-in questions, reminder of peer support availability, support pathways information, and encouragement to seek support if needed	<b>GOAL:</b> To ensure that young volunteers have knowledge of and access to all provided supports <b>Action 1:</b> Agency-specific wellbeing team to develop support pathways documentation for inclusion in induction materials and availability online and in hard copy <b>Action 2:</b> Provide young volunteers with information on mental health services available, how to access them, and assurance that support accessed is confidential
CAPACITY BUILDING	<b>GOAL:</b> To facilitate access to and foster transfer of positive mental health skills and skill development techniques through training and activities <b>Action 1:</b> Provide access to the knowledge product and promote the skills and strategies relating to positive mental health skill development <b>Action 2:</b> Incorporate mental health skills training into induction, training, and unit activities	<b>GOAL:</b> To facilitate access to and foster transfer of knowledge and skills for prevention of mental health concerns through training and activities <b>Action 1:</b> Provide access to training which will promote skills and strategies relating to protective mental health <b>Action 2:</b> Provide psychoeducation during recruitment and induction about potential mental health risks of being an emergency service volunteer, including cumulative trauma exposure, and the importance of early intervention <b>Action 3:</b> Provide leadership personnel with training in mental health, which is tailored for the emergency services sector (e.g. mental health or psychological first aid) <b>Action 4:</b> Incorporate mental health or psychological first aid principles in induction, training, and unit activities by inviting trained leadership personnel to share knowledge <b>Action 5:</b> Develop and implement protocol for a regular check-in with young volunteers, that is not necessarily linked to incidents	<b>GOAL:</b> To facilitate access to mental health information and support networks pre- and post-incident <b>Action 1:</b> Promote social support, through identifying personal and volunteer networks <b>Action 2:</b> Provide information to operational leadership personnel about how to engage in positive mental health conversations in order to engage in mental health check-ins pre-incident as needed <b>Action 3:</b> Include adults between approximate ages of 25 to 35 in the peer support network <b>Action 4:</b> Young volunteers to be made aware that peer support officers are also supported, to reduce perception of burden	<b>GOAL:</b> To foster increased awareness, accessibility, and promotion of available supports and confidential channels of reporting <b>Action 1:</b> Implement leadership training to increase knowledge of what services are available, promote support seeking, and prompt confidential support access for young volunteers as needed <b>Action 2:</b> Develop a confidential reporting protocol, and provide access and information on how to report workplace hazards confidentially, e.g. bullying or harassment <b>Action 3:</b> Appoint a dedicated staff member to guide volunteers through the process of reporting workplace hazards <b>Action 4:</b> Provide young volunteers in rural and remote regions with information on how to access online support networks and services

#### References

Beyond Blue Ltd. (2016). Good practice framework for mental health and wellbeing in first responder organisations. [https://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/good-practice-guide-first-responders\\_bll675\\_acc\\_std.pdf?sfvrsn=e4b02c4d\\_8](https://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/good-practice-guide-first-responders_bll675_acc_std.pdf?sfvrsn=e4b02c4d_8)

Beyond Blue Ltd. (2018). Answering the Call National Survey, National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services–Final Report. <https://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/1898>

McGorry, P. D. & Mei, C. (2018). Early intervention in youth mental health: Progress and future directions. Evidence Based Mental Health, 21(4), 182–184. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ebmental-2018-300060>

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Access the full report and download the resources here



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