

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Monday 20 November 2023

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WITNESS

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Welcome, Mr Heinrichs. I will just start out by allowing the committee members to introduce themselves. Ms Watt, would you like to kick off, please.

Sheena WATT: Hi. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hello. Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: David Ettershank, Western Metro Region and acting Chair for the day.

Samantha RATNAM: Afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Northern Metropolitan.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Melina BATH: Hello. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We welcome your opening comments but ask you to keep that to a maximum of 10 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for questions. For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and any organisations you are appearing on behalf of? Thank you.

Andrew HEINRICHS: My name is Andrew Heinrichs, and I am appearing on behalf of the Australian Institute of Health and Safety. I would like to start by briefly acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which this forum is being held, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and emerging leaders. Thank you for having me here today.

The Australian Institute of Health and Safety is the largest peak body in occupational health and safety. We represent the profession across Australia, and we seek to provide a voice for that profession in order to advance and improve health and safety policy outcomes. The institute leads many initiatives – things like the *OHS Body of Knowledge*, which was started in partnership with WorkSafe Victoria some years ago here in Victoria; accrediting university courses in the tertiary sector for health and safety; events; professional development; and a range of activities similar to what most peak bodies do.

I also wanted to just make a comment and acknowledge the family, colleagues and peers of the individual who lost his life last week up in New South Wales combating the bushfires up there. I think whilst I had to dig back and look at the records of this submission made earlier in the year, it brings into sharp focus again the importance of this work, and is a timely reminder, I suppose, to acknowledge the group for holding these hearings and seeking to make improvements in this space. There is a lot to do, both in Victoria and around the country.

To clarify my role, I am appearing today on behalf of Mr Sajan James, who was the signatory of our submission some months back. We are volunteers for this institute, and he is not the chair of the Victorian branch committee anymore. So my role with the institute is Chair of the Policy and Advocacy Committee, which operates at a national level in each jurisdiction around the country, and I had some input into the submission some months back as well.

The other opening comment that I wanted to clarify and put on the record is around conflicts of interest. I am here as a volunteer representing the institute of health and safety. I mentioned that I walked across the road to get here. My full-time role is with the Department of Justice and Community Safety for the Victorian state government. I did not seek and do not have any authorisation to be representing them at all today or their views. My views and input are purely on behalf of the institute of health and safety, so I just wanted to clarify that. To that extent, the submission was made from the perspective of what I would describe as interested external stakeholders: health and safety professionals working across many industries around Victoria. None of the people who contributed have direct links to the parties involved. So, for example, none of them work for WorkSafe Victoria or VICSES or any of the organisations dealing with the response to the floods. They are all Victorian citizens and so have a personal interest and connection to the work as individuals.

Finally, I just wanted to touch on the key points, I guess, of our submission before going to questions, if that is okay, just to highlight and for the record. From our perspective as health and safety professionals, a strong and capable and well-resourced health and safety regulator is in our interests. It makes our job easier, and we think it is better for industry, better for the broader community. To that extent, the regulator's involvement through this incident last year had room for improvement in terms of the visibility I suppose of communications and advice and materials that the health and safety regulator was able to turn around and quickly release and distribute. We would add that those communications – you know, it is 2023 – need to be thought about more broadly. I will use an old-school term: multimedia – social media, visual, video communications, not just written, and multilingual as well for the various communities across Victoria.

We submitted that WorkSafe Victoria should be included earlier on in these response processes. As I mentioned, none of the contributors involved in the submission work for WorkSafe Victoria, so that may be occurring already. It did not seem to be, to us, that it was. But if it is not occurring, it should be as a way of keeping health and safety front of mind through the preparation and response activities around these incidents.

Further, our role through the policy work that we do is to be a voice for health and safety. So health and safety needs to be kept front and centre – the various legislative frameworks that exist and not just the legal frameworks, the concepts and the practice. Ideas such as hierarchy of controls, how risk is dealt with, preparing individuals around health and safety capabilities – both volunteer, general community members and workers – are really important and need to be kept front and centre for any initiatives that are being considered or developed.

As I said earlier, we think it is a good thing to have a well-resourced – appropriately resourced – and capable regulator and other emergency service organisations as well, such as VICSES. Through our understanding in forming the submission, VICSES still appear to do a lot of grassroots fundraising, based on historical practices. We think it is time that organisations like those level up and are treated in a more professional way, I guess, through all levels, but that includes funding and resourcing. They appear to invest a significant amount of time just fundraising to keep baseline operations and infrastructure running.

Finally, our submission highlights a few of the specific physical health and safety impacts that these sorts of events can have on workers, volunteers and the community. What I think are noticeably missing from our submission are also the psychological impacts, which are only going to grow, particularly where we have cascading events. I am happy to take any questions and if I do not know the exact answers to steer the committee in the right direction for where those answers and resources are.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you, Mr Heinrichs. Ms Bath, would you like to kick off?

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. Thank you for coming here.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We have got probably about 6 minutes per speaker, but it is a little fluid.

Melina BATH: Okay, fabulous – a fluid 6 minutes. Thank you, Chair. Thank you for being here. From a health and safety point of view, what are your primary concerns – you representing the Australian Institute of Health & Safety – as identified post the floods? What are those key things in terms of health and safety, looking at a response and then a recovery?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think it goes to the heart of the point we made in the opening part of our submission. Many not-for-profit or volunteer-based organisations are low down on the risk maturity capability

rating, if I can put it that way. People are full of good intentions and goodwill. They get involved for the right reasons. They generally, if I can say, want to get their hands dirty and get right into it. Organisations such as VICSES have that challenge of striking the right balance of providing a rewarding and a meaningful experience for their volunteers that does not smother the experience with procedural or bureaucratic or traditional safety management practices. I think number one for us is stakeholders thinking about volunteers in a more work-like manner and having the right support systems and processes and capability around those volunteers but not going too far and still attracting and retaining volunteers. As we noted in our submission and I think is widely acknowledged, volunteer rates are in a slight decline, particularly in these areas. High-risk work is effectively what these volunteers are carrying out. Under the definitions of the legislation it is high-risk work.

Melina BATH: Thank you. We noted from the volunteer organisation, the peak body of VICSES, that they were very concerned that the government has recently – I think in April this year – closed down the volunteer consultative forum. Noting your experience and comments about respecting them and engaging and supporting that system, is that a wise move to shut down a consultative forum?

Andrew HEINRICHS: Is that in the VICSES landscape specifically?

Melina BATH: It was across VICSES and other CFA volunteer emergency groups. The government had a consultative forum, where there was engagement, and it shut that specific one down.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes, okay. Without knowing the details of the forum or the reasons behind the decision, on face value, yes, that decision should be considered really carefully. I think organisations need to be, to use an overused term, leaning in more and getting greater connection and input from volunteers, not less. That is only going to improve outcomes. At the end of the day volunteer-based workforces are no different to any other workforce across industry. Usually the guy on the tools has good solutions –

Melina BATH: Understanding.

Andrew HEINRICHS: and a greater understanding of work compared to management policy designers or even health and safety advisers, so if those communication pathways are eroded, then that is –

Melina BATH: Unhelpful.

Andrew HEINRICHS: maybe to the detriment, yes, of achieving good outcomes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I appreciate that very much. Part 10 of your submission says members perceived WorkSafe Victoria to be more reactive in the floods than proactive. Can you give us an example of where you see WorkSafe Victoria as being reactive, and how you could see that being proactive?

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes. In those conversations – I mentioned that I chair the policy committee, which sits at a national level – we simply spoke to our peers around the country and had them share their experiences. I am not sure whether it is the climate-related historical factors or cultural, but it appeared that other regulators around the country were a bit further down the path when it came to preparing these sorts of guidance that I am talking about. I think there was an example put forward around Queensland, with waterborne disease and things like that. There are already, if not codes of practice, at least well-established, mature bits of information.

Melina BATH: Exemplar behaviour.

Andrew HEINRICHS: We felt that in just doing that desktop comparison Victoria was maybe a little bit behind the eight ball, but I think we need to catch up.

Melina BATH: Sure. Thank you very much. I want to talk about mental health and workforce responsiveness. We heard at Mooroopna and Rochester the need for mental health triage support services for victims, for the community, but also that it needed to be ramped up and then sustained and then the difficulty sometimes in accessing that mental health workforce to triage. What are your comments in relation to that?

Andrew HEINRICHS: The health and safety profession is making up ground from a fair way behind. In our world historically, because of our roots – the profession was borne out of the engineering and mining sectors largely – there is a greater focus on physical health and safety risks. Psychological – we are playing catch-up. It is a different skill set, it is a different subject matter; different types of capabilities are required.

Both in our own profession and across industry and within the healthcare system there needs to be significant building of capabilities around this, because as you said, it cannot be just a few sessions and then the person is fixed. It has got to be ongoing support. Those capabilities need to be built and sustained and continue to grow, I think, given what we are going to see from these events.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for being here today. We really appreciate your insights. Have there been any specific health and safety guidelines or recommendations that have been developed since the floods?

Andrew HEINRICHS: From the regulator?

Gaelle BROAD: Well, just from your insights, I guess, into what is happening on the ground, just to give you one thing to get your feedback on as well – I guess volunteers jump in to help with the floods. They often put themselves in very dangerous situations, saving their next-door neighbours with their own boat, whereas other authorised agencies may be restricted from jumping into those situations. We have heard from volunteering groups as well that talk about the possibility of future disasters tapping into that extra volunteer resource, but your submission does refer to treating volunteers like paid employees, and the volunteering peak body were sort of not sure when it comes to liability of how a volunteer does jump in and help. I guess moving forward, looking at making the most of volunteers, how do you balance that with the risks that are there?

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes, and that is –

Gaelle BROAD: It is a long question, sorry.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes, and it is a great question. That is part of the balance that needs to be struck that I was talking about earlier – how do volunteer-based organisations better professionalise their workforce, for want of a better word, have better systems around them without unnecessarily taking on those risks that you are talking about, from a liability perspective. A lot of the duties that are involved are absolute, if I can use that term. There are responsibilities that are there, whether anybody wants to acknowledge them or things change or whatnot. As for specific data, I mean, the regulator would have that information as to specific cases, of case volume or whatnot, that have emerged from the events. But I think getting that balance right is the challenge before those groups.

Gaelle BROAD: Say, if it was not an organised group, and we tap into volunteers that are just saying, ‘I can come and help. How can I help? I want to jump in.’

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think we refer to that as spontaneous, yes. I do not have too many answers for the group on that, but that is another great question, yes. And where do the liabilities extend to?

Gaelle BROAD: That is right.

Andrew HEINRICHS: When do you say no?

Gaelle BROAD: Because I guess that is the thing – if we follow the risk like we treat employees, they would not be saving their neighbour. So the question has been raised before by the volunteering group: what can governments do? And I guess in looking at recommendations, that could be something that you would be able to provide advice on.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes. And I think there may be an opportunity for definition or clarity there too around spontaneous versus, ‘Okay, I’m a volunteer training twice a week,’ because they are so different.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, they are very different. I mean, for one there is an expectation of training and for the other there may not be.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Where do you draw a line between helping your neighbour with a boat and volunteering?

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. So you do not have any insights, but you think it is a good question.

Andrew HEINRICHS: No. So I think with the spontaneous help, you know, the neighbour helping with boats, we think there are still opportunities there. There are community education opportunities around sensible risk-management practices, and I know not driving through floodwaters is one that has been promoted really strongly across government recently. But the electrical risks – for example, baseline education around if a pole is in a water hazard or things like that, physical hazard awareness and risk controls – there are huge opportunities there for better community education around those.

Gaelle BROAD: Can you talk to that a bit? You do talk about WorkSafe guides in Queensland as being a resource. What have they got that Victoria could learn from?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think the regulator guides around the country will always be focused more on businesses, where there is that explicit requirement of duty holders and a director or an officer is expected to pick the document up and read it and implement those practices in their workplace. I think that is where the regulator needs to keep focusing here on the industry, effectively, and those duty holders. The spontaneous volunteer piece around community uplift I think needs to be shared more broadly beyond WorkSafe. Other organisations – we are almost talking the sort of public health realm, really. Wearing a mask – we should have some good experience over the last few years through that.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, dangerous situations – I know one neighbour that went in and their neighbour was still cooking on a stove with water coming into the house. So they are very dangerous situations to be in.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Baseline practices around: if a tree falls on your roof, where do you start lopping it down? You know, there are lots of things.

Gaelle BROAD: And just my final question – how do you envisage your role in future disasters?

Andrew HEINRICHS: So I think our message today is that the health and safety profession stands here ready and willing to provide support. I think that focus on resourcing and investment that I talked about earlier for organisations like VICSES – of course we will say this, but we really believe internal health and safety capability has got to be a really important part of that. We should be really proud here in Victoria of the level of health and safety expertise that we have. WorkSafe Victoria has a program called OHS Essentials, which is connecting health and safety consultants with small businesses. It is at subsidised or free rates. It is a nation-leading project, we think. So there are people there, there are skills there, there are smarts there – it is about getting them involved in the right way, particularly around the state through smaller communities and these other parts of industry. That is the challenge before us.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Terrific, thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. Thank you, Mr Heinrichs, for being here and for your really important submission, particularly at this moment when we have heard, you know, a couple of months' worth of really interesting submissions. I think it highlights the need to pay enough attention to what is happening with our workforces, paid and unpaid, and I think you have highlighted that our ability to be able to respond to more frequent and intense disaster events is interdependent with our ability to have a workforce, paid or unpaid, that is well and able to withstand, you know, the intensity of these disasters.

Just picking up the point talking about disaster fatigued or impacted volunteers or workers and just being mindful of what that will mean for our future ability to respond to disasters if we do not have that workforce there, my question is, and highlighting just how important your work is: do you or any other organisation collect those workforce impacts? So, for example, from the 2022 events, has anyone collected the impact on the workforce – whether paid or unpaid – whether it was injuries, long-term psychological distress, impact support that that workforce needed, or is that a gap that we might need to think about in the future?

Andrew HEINRICHS: In terms of worker-based statistics, the regulator would be the first port of call. I am sorry, I am not sure if they have appeared already, or they are scheduled to appear. But they would definitely be the first port of call for those sorts of data. What I think is valuable for the committee to understand is that they will only have that data at the claims level, which means something needs to progress to a claim, and we know through supporting businesses in Victoria and around the country that lots of injuries occur and do not progress

to claim level. There are a range of reasons why it may not go to a claim, so there are lots of injuries and harm that can be sustained that is invisible to the regulator through that dataset. Beyond that, Safe Work Australia collects national statistics, but again Safe Work Australia is the national policy health and safety body. But again, their data will be also very claims focused. There are a couple of datasets run by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that do focus more broadly on those non-claims injuries. That is another key thing that we would advocate for: more surveys by that agency on this topic of work-related harm across all industries at all times, not just in relation to floods, would be extremely beneficial to help policymakers understand the extent of harm that is occurring in the community across all workplaces, not just in regard to floods. That is where I would begin.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. That is really useful. It gives us some good pointers as well, because it has been interesting. Through this inquiry so far we have been looking at it from the perspective of we need volunteer workforces as well as paid workforces. We have been looking at training and capacity building kind of gaps and opportunities to ensure that volunteers get the support they need to have meaningful volunteer work et cetera and the systems utilise them as best as possible, but maybe not so much of a focus on what happens when they become volunteers and might be harmed or injured and then what that does to retention. I think that has brought that into focus for me, so thank you very much for that.

You talk in your submission as well about, for example, during flood events what kind of impact and what kinds of harms can come to workers. You talk about waterborne forms of diseases, lacerations et cetera, heat-related conditions, potentially fatal drowning risks as well. A very specific question: with the waterborne and other forms of disease, do you have any data or can you point us to where we can get that data about what kinds of diseases are impacting workers and volunteers and what might we need to do to support workers better?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think the previous question and answer focus more on that traditional volunteer. This latter question is more in that spontaneous space, particularly more towards the public health space is where I would be starting with health departments. I am not a medical practitioner, but I know that there are notifiable diseases and things like that that need to be recorded in a particular way. They are the datasets that would house that information.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. That is very helpful. A slightly different question but related to contaminated water – residents near the Maribyrnong got very inconsistent information about contaminated water, often only being told after they had been wading through it for hours that they should not touch it. I do not know if volunteers received better information. How would you like to see contaminated water information communicated better in future?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think it is a classic line of environmental-based health risk that is absolutely contingent on EPA Victoria and WorkSafe Victoria working really well together. I know that from our perspective, and we have shared this publicly in previous submissions, those two agencies have made significant improvements in relation to dangerous goods and contaminated sites and joined-up approach and all of that sort of thing before. I think that approach needs to be progressed further into this space.

Samantha RATNAM: You can take this notice if you want: your submission notes declining volunteer numbers. Do you have any thoughts on what can be done to either increase the appeal of volunteering or reduce dependence on volunteers in disasters? I guess that question is in the frame of particularly you are at harm and risk, so volunteers potentially at harm or risk are not likely to come back. Do you have any thoughts on retention and harm in that intersection?

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes. I think without generalising there is a generational shift happening where employers who provide safe and healthy workplaces will be more likely to attract and retain individuals, and I think that extends to volunteering. If you are not enjoying and finding your volunteering work meaningful and safe and healthy, and that includes psychologically, you are not going to stick around.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Ratnam. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: I am just wondering if you can give us any specific examples of where you feel that excessive risk was taken in the professional, volunteer or spontaneous workforce during the floods?

Andrew HEINRICHS: No, I would not have specific examples, or I can take it on notice. Our submission was drawing upon the general experiences of health and safety professionals living and working in Victoria at the time, but I am not aware of any of them sharing specific incidents or events, at least in their disclosures.

Wendy LOVELL: Chair, it has all been asked, so I am fine, thanks.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you, Acting Chair. Thank you, Mr Heinrichs, for being with us today. I had one question that was taken up by one of my fellow committee members, so I will ask about the points in the submission regarding WorkSafe Victoria where you mentioned that some of your members saw WorkSafe Victoria as responsive rather than proactive during the flood event. What sorts of opportunities can you see for improved proactive communications in future flooding events from important agencies like WorkSafe?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think I mentioned earlier I am not sure if WorkSafe are already involved in the emergency management ecosystem, whether they get included adequately; based on what our contributors saw and experienced, it seemed not. One perspective was that it was more of an afterthought: 'Oh, there are work, health and safety implications here, maybe we should' – you know, very much sort of scrambling. So I think involving them meaningfully and their having the right emergency-based capabilities internally as well is the best way to improve that.

Sheena WATT: I appreciate that, thank you. One of the further points made in the submission with respect to that is the incorporation of WorkSafe Victoria into pre-emergency warnings and communications, so thank you for that. Do you have anything further to add on that recommendation?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think the regulator generally – our view is that their communications capabilities and strategies have improved over the years.

Sheena WATT: They have improved, did you say?

Andrew HEINRICHS: They have improved through better use of social media and those ways. But I think further integration could occur.

Sheena WATT: There is still more to be done.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes.

Sheena WATT: That is good. I did read in the submission where there was a suggestion about Queensland providing an example of the development of effective resources for stakeholders in respect of OH&S risks. Let me just say as somebody who previously worked in WorkCover Queensland I am very happy to see those good works and good deeds getting recognised down here. Are there any other insights from what you saw happen up in Queensland that you thought would be worth the committee knowing about?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I can take it on notice.

Sheena WATT: Perhaps that is an insight from somebody else on the committee.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes, we have a Queensland branch with practitioners operating across the state, so they would be happy to provide thoughts on or further information around that.

Sheena WATT: I would appreciate that and seeing what developments and changes have happened in that time.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes, not a problem.

Sheena WATT: Acting Chair, do I have some more time? I do have a couple more questions, but I am happy to stop.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: You can keep going; you are all right.

Sheena WATT: You had also recommended that Victorian communities build greater self-sufficiency to reduce their dependence on SES Victoria and other emergency services. What opportunities do you see for communities? Talk to us about what that self-sufficiency might look like. Are there particular areas where we need to grow that? I think it is worth exploring. I am just trying to understand that.

Andrew HEINRICHS: It is a contested space. Communities are receiving a lot of information probably from government already, and there is perhaps a bit of information fatigue given what we have just been through in regard to the pandemic. But I think it is capability building and information across various formats that is required, whether it is government-led workshops or sharing examples of good practice or more explicit information campaigns. I think it is a really worthwhile thing to consider an investment to make, given what they will be faced with in coming years. My view is actually quite bullish on it. We do not have a choice, really, because no level of investment in VICSES and other emergency services will bring the system up to what we need. It has got to be both, I believe. We see health and safety as a socio-complex technical system. It is inputs, process, outputs, and those inputs include capability building and resources and trucks and everything else, and people. Then there is a process and then there is an output, and risk kind of flutters around in the middle. With the changing risk profile of the environment that we are living and working in, it will need a multifaceted and significant increase in its inputs to accommodate that risk. That is a bit philosophical – apologies. But it is almost a game of maths – a game of numbers, really.

Sheena WATT: We do not mind some of that on a Monday afternoon. Thank you very much. That is it from me.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mrs Tyrrell?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Actually, my colleague Ms Ratnam covered my questions. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Such a collaborative place.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: We are very efficient here.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Heinrichs. I have to say when I am looking at this question it sort of does my head in a little bit, because I was always trained, like, ‘Remove hazard at source.’ Obviously that is not an applicable principle, but I was always taught it was the first one. I guess the other thing we have got a sense of from the hearings is that there is a fairly high level of territorialism between the different agencies. I am wondering, if we asked the SES about health and safety training as a priority, whether they would agree, or to put it another way –

Andrew HEINRICHS: With our submission, or with what we are discussing?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: No, with the concept that they might actually have a significant shortfall in health and safety training. Perhaps to put a fairer question: has there been, do you know, any sort of training needs analysis that has been done to ascertain the extent of any gaps?

Andrew HEINRICHS: You would have to ask VICSES. I think with our submission we deliberately did not include the views of anybody who works at VICSES, to maintain that independence, so it is hard to comment. I would not want to comment on their levels internally, whether they think they are adequate or not. It is not a cop-out, but my further answer would be that you can always improve and do more in that space. The workforce can always. If they are receiving an adequate volume of training, then training can always be improved and updated. There are always opportunities for improvement there.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: There are always opportunities to expend resources there, which is a question of prioritisation.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Exactly, which accountants do not want to hear, but it is a question of prioritising. It would be a question for them really, how they feel internally.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay, so in terms of the institute’s perspective, are there identified specific locations where the organisation has identified critical shortfalls in training and awareness?

Andrew HEINRICHS: At VICSES or just generally?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Obviously there are a huge number of agencies and locations that fall within the scope. Perhaps if I put it another way: the priorities for providing additional training and education – what would be the institute’s view on the absolute priorities that you have identified?

Andrew HEINRICHS: That they can be elevated and increased, I suppose.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Sorry, I have probably asked the question poorly. Are there particular areas in terms of particular agencies or particular cohorts where the institute has identified significant shortfalls in training and awareness?

Andrew HEINRICHS: No, we have not done that gap analysis to specifically identify shortfalls across any organisation or sector. Our submission is based on not just how these floods specifically – I do not know if this impacts in terms of being outside the terms of reference – were dealt with but also what is to come.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: It is outside our terms of reference, but I think we are all cognisant that we are entering an El Niño, and, yes, there will be many of the same questions. You referenced some stats, potentially from the ABS.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Could I ask you to take that on notice in terms of providing the committee with that subsequently?

Andrew HEINRICHS: I can absolutely provide you with the data from the most recent survey that was run. I would have to check what year that was, but I think it was fairly recently.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay. That would be great. I think we are happy to just sort of try and receive information, so if there is stuff that comes to mind, we would be appreciative of that. We are looking for solutions.

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes, absolutely, and as I said, we advocate strongly that we would love it if that survey was run far more frequently, to be honest.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I will just check with the panel. Other questions? Mrs Broad?

Gaëlle BROAD: You indicated you have not done particular research into gaps or anything so this might be just more of a comment, because we had feedback that mental health support workers have been given very short contracts – like six-month contracts, that sort of thing. Do you have any thoughts or recommendations moving forward for those contracts?

Andrew HEINRICHS: Look, without going into the specifics, I think I would go to my earlier comment that this cannot be seen as an increase or an improvement in mental health support services delivered to a region or a community and then a period of time expires and then, ‘Job done, we’re all off and that’s it.’ I think a longer term view needs to be taken both in supply side and in terms of the capability. If those people who are delivering those services, even if they fulfil that six-month contract or whatever it is in that community – six months is quite a short period of time – if that community gives feedback that they are serviced or whatnot, based on what we are seeing, there will be demand elsewhere across the state. I do not think that is an unreasonable position. It needs permanent changes, I think.

Gaëlle BROAD: I note, too, in your submission, point 19, it says the Emergency Services Foundation:

... traditionally focuses more on mental health.

But it says:

We see opportunities to focus on building industry and community capabilities across a broader range of skills, including home/property flood preparation, flood enduring skills and actions, and effective and safe flood response measures.

Can you expand on what that is in terms of practical training?

Andrew HEINRICHS: Community capability uplift – as I said earlier, whether it is through things like workshops, training courses provided for community members or information and resources provided in

accessible ways for community members. We have done some work in the past, as an analogy, in ladder safety and talked to groups like manufacturers in that sort of space. So if in this instance we are talking about safe use of boats or chainsaws, perhaps there is another industry stakeholder that can be engaged to be a part of the delivery of that capability uplift.

Gaëlle BROAD: So you are not seeing it as specifically WorkSafe Victoria – it could be the organisation that has those volunteers with that particular need or resource, like the SES.

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think it needs to be both.

Gaëlle BROAD: Okay, so across –

Andrew HEINRICHS: Yes. Our position is, with the lag that was spoken about earlier, that there is probably a lack of emergency response knowledge and capability within the regulator. That would be our view.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. That is all.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: And Ms Watt, do you have one more question?

Sheena WATT: Yes, I did have a further question, and thanks for allowing me the time, Deputy Chair. The point you made in the submission regarding future cascading crises, and we have heard that from some of the witnesses beforehand, was that they will require the mobilisation of communities to implement strategies such as sort of ‘standing armies’ – I think that might have been the terminology that you used. What do you foresee might be some of the OH&S professional implications of that? Because it is really worthy of consideration.

Andrew HEINRICHS: I think it is, and it goes to the heart of the earlier question around drawing the line between spontaneous support and a traditional volunteer and that if more preparation is done around those groups of people, whatever they are called, it moves them along that spectrum I guess of duties owed, expectations and potentially liability. I think any preparations in advance need to be done really thoughtfully in that respect. VICSES would have X number of thousand volunteers. This sort of approach that we are talking about would potentially involve many, many more people around the state, so that needs to be thought about in terms of the scale and the risk that that carries. For example, if a training program was run out and communities were provided with information to help them prepare for a flood or other event, there are specific duties under health and safety legislation around information being provided to workers, and if that information was not correct, then the implications are that much greater at that scale.

Sheena WATT: That was it for my questions. Thank you, Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. In that case, Mr Heinrichs, thank you very much for joining us today. It is really appreciated. You will get a copy of the transcript about a week before it goes public, which you may like to review at that time. Given we are a little ahead of time, can I suggest we just take a break for 5 minutes and then we will move straight into the next session. We will end the session there.

Witness withdrew.