



Police Federation of Australia

The National Voice of Policing

SUBMISSION to the

Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

via – COVID-19Inquiry@pmc.gov.au

Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

The Police Federation of Australia (PFA) is the national body representing the professional and industrial interests of Australia's more than 65,000 police officers, across all state, territory, and the federal police jurisdictions.

Membership as at: 31 December 2022	
Police Association of South Australia	4,703
Western Australia Police Union of Workers	6,880
Queensland Police Union of Employees	12,177
The Police Association of Victoria	17,424
Police Association of NSW	17,020
Police Association of Tasmania	1,415
Northern Territory Police Association	1,628
Australian Federal Police Association	4,040
Police Federation of Australia	65,287

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

The PFA made a more detailed submission to the 2020 Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic where we raised a range of issues that impacted on police throughout and post the pandemic.

Policing is predominantly the responsibility of state and territory governments and our roles during the pandemic do not fit neatly into this Inquiry's Terms of Reference, however, there were numerous issues and strategies, agreed through National Cabinet, that police were responsible for enforcing, that became problematic as the pandemic unfolded.

In our 2020 submission we highlighted a range of matters, particularly in relation to police occupational health and safety issues, including –

- Access to and the quality of personal protective equipment (PPE) and its priority procurement;
- Priority COVID testing of 1st responders;
- Ensuring presumptive workers compensation legislation where an officer contracts COVID, ensuring that it's accepted, it was contracted in the course of their duty;
- The importance of legislation for offences of spitting or deliberately coughing on police and other 1st responders;
- The lack of workplace amenities at remote check points such as toilets, showers, protection from weather, provision of meals and facilities for sleeping;
- Challenges with social distancing requirements in police watchhouses and in courts;
- Policing in remote and indigenous communities; and
- The impact of working during COVID on the mental health of officers.

The pandemic also impacted police in a range of other instances, including –

- The impact on community attitudes towards police during a range of high profile incidents;
- The impact on police resources;
- Access to childcare during periods of lockdown when officers were required to work;
- Access to public transport or car parking during periods of lockdown when officers were required to work; and
- Police involvement in the quarantining of returning travelers.

Whilst I would be happy to provide material on any, or all, of the points raised above to the Inquiry, due to space limits and in consideration of your Inquiry's Terms of Reference, I will limit this submission to issues around police **“access to and the quality of personal protective equipment and its priority procurement”**.

From the commencement of COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, access to appropriate PPE became an issue of concern for police. Whilst it is accepted that in normal circumstances it would be the responsibility of the employer, in our case, the respective police forces, to provide such equipment, no provision appears to have been made for a national response to such a crisis.

Issues identified by members that could have been averted by a national response to the provisions and procurement of PPE include –

- In general, initial sourcing and funding of PPE was the responsibility of local police commands, leading to shortages of equipment and an inability to quickly source replacement supplies. This was of specific concern, particularly in smaller commands and in smaller jurisdictions;
- Members being told to use the PPE sparingly in the early stages of the pandemic to keep it in reserve for when things got worse;

- Low stocks of face masks, as the pandemic came close on the back of the bushfires, as well as gloves. This concern was amplified when many police were deployed to various locations taking responsibility for quarantined travelers and when conducting close community interactions such as random breath testing operations, compliance checks for people who were required to self-isolate or when auditing travelers' movements at numerous checkpoints;
- The suitability of the equipment, having regard to the nature of the work and any hazard associated with the work;
- A suitable size, fit and reasonable comfort for the wearer; and
- The equipment not having been maintained, clean and hygienic or in good working order.

Disasters such as the 2019-20 bushfires and now the COVID-19 outbreak amplifies a greater emphasis on a new federalism in policing. State and territory borders remain but are being enhanced by greater national strategies and national collaboration. These national initiatives, being driven by a national coalition of governments and public safety agencies, is vitally important when tackling disasters that cross state borders.

However, in policing, in many instances, when it comes to equipment, each jurisdiction, still –

- Draws up its own standards and product specifications;
- Individually trials the same or similar products;
- Separately determines potential suppliers;
- Separately writes contracts for products;
- Individually undertakes tender evaluations; and finally
- Purchases products.

Now is the time to ensure a greater collaboration in the procurement of appropriate PPE and other relevant equipment, across not only police jurisdictions, but possibly across other 1st responder and health agencies. A greater collaborative approach to purchasing such commonly used equipment should be central to the Australian Government's drive to improve productivity, enhance national standards and performance and make monetary savings where feasible. Any such outcome will likewise improve future frontline services to the community.

I would be happy to provide any further material to expand on any aspects of this submission.

Sincerely yours,



Scott Weber APM
Chief Executive Officer
15 December 2023