

Thursday, 22 June, 2023

MEDIA RELEASE



First responders call for back-up with Heart2Heart Walk

A JOURNEY of 3000km will get under way on July 1 when a group of former and serving first responders sets out from the geographic heart of Australia bound for the heart of its government in Canberra.

Dubbed the Heart2Heart Walk, it is being staged to urge the Federal Government to better support the wellbeing of Australia's 400,000 volunteer and 80,000 salaried first responders.

The route starts at the Lambert Centre of Australia, and winds through outback South Australia into Broken Hill before following the River Murray and crossing the Murrumbidgee.

It will conclude on September 28, when a petition is presented to the Prime Minister compelling support for all 14 recommendations made following a 2019 Senate Inquiry entitled [The people behind 000: mental health of our first responders](#).

Organiser Vince Pannell APM said first responders have one of Australia's highest suicide and PTSD rates, and the walk aims to raise awareness as well as funds by putting the spotlight on a national problem too often shouldered in silence.

"The Heart2Heart journey is more than just a walk; it's our commitment to fighting for better mental health services for all Australian first responders and their families," Vince said.

"Compared with the average Australian, first responders are twice as likely to report suicidal thoughts, three times more likely to have a plan for completion, and six times more likely to experience symptoms of PTSD.

"We need to ensure these ordinary people who do extraordinary things in protecting, rescuing and caring for people in our community day in and day out receive the support they need."

The [Heart2Heart Walk is already accepting donations](#), and has prioritised the funding of research into the extent of mental health issues and incidents, and suicide, among former and serving first responders.

"Data available at present is anecdotal; there's no empirical evidence, so it's hard to know how big the problem is across the different jurisdictions."

Vince said while first responders were inherently willing to deal with challenging situations, and over extended periods, fatigue caused by call-outs or call-aways on top of regular work, and exposure to trauma, can take a terrible toll.

"Part of the problem is the frequency of disasters in a season that used to run from November to March, and now it's more like September to May.

"The emergency management cycle is about building resilience, response and recovery, and then reviewing what's happened.

“We do it with the incidents and not the people; when people get broken, they need help too.”

While the national average age life expectancy for Australians is 83, data collected in 2015-16 shows the average for former Australian Federal Police officers is just 62.

Vince said Heart2Heart hopes to work with authorities to establish an inaugural national committee to represent first responders.

“We want it to help guide an education system for organisations, first responders and their families that can keep people doing the work they love through covering off on mental health.

“We’re not saying Heart2Heart has all the answers, but through research, education and co-operation, we want to help build a framework that puts first responders in contact with those that can help them.”

Vince said an “amazing and unique spirit” is shared by first responders, who can work together, regardless of the uniform they wear, in emergency situations.

In contrast, first responders often suffer alone post event.

“United we stand, divided we fall.”

“If we don’t fix that, we’re not sending a positive message to people who are considering become first responders, and we’re not supporting the people who have already done so much.”

The Heart2Heart Walk includes the following event and engagement days which provide individuals, groups, communities and media the chance to speak with Heart2Heart’s walkers:

- Smoking ceremony with Aunty Violet Sheridan at National Emergency Services Memorial, Rond Terrace, Parkes, ACT: 10-10.30am, Monday, June 26;
- Charity auction at Mt Dare Hotel: 7pm, Monday, July 3;
- Oodnadatta: Monday, July 10;
- Marree: Saturday, July 22;
- Leigh Creek: Wednesday, July 26;
- Hawker: Saturday, July 29;
- Peterborough: Saturday, Aug 5;
- Broken Hill: Saturday, Aug 12;
- Mildura: Saturday, Aug 19;
- Swan Hill: Monday, Aug 28;
- Kerang: Thursday, Aug 31;
- Deniliquin: Tuesday, Sep 5;
- Wagga Wagga: Thursday, Sep 14;
- Junee: Monday, Sep 18;
- Gundagai: Thursday, Sep 21;
- Tumut: Sunday, Sep 24;
- Uriara to Government House, Canberra: Police Bank H2H Team Challenge Day, Sep 27;
- Government House to Parliament House, H2H Family Walk Day, Sep 28.

Media contacts:

Vince Pannell: AFP officer since 1986, 0408 686 711, heart2heartwalk@gmail.com

Pia Schindler: NSW Police officer 2001-2019, co-founder of Emerge & See,
pia@emergeandsee.org.au

Stephen “Hoppy” Hopkin: NSW Police officer 1987-2020, NSW Rural Fire Service since 1980, 0414 999 294, hobby246@bigpond.com

Matt U’Brien: NSW Police: 1995-2013; Fire and Rescue NSW: 2006-2022; Host of the Heart 2 Heart Podcast, 0418 219 339, hotdebrief@gmail.com

Billy Brooks: Special operations and combat paramedic in Scotland: 2003-2013, ACT Ambulance paramedic 2013-2023: Since June 2023: ACT Rural Fire Service, 0406 546 707,
william.brooks@act.gov.au

Media enquiries: Liz Wells, 0418 484 446, elizwells@bigpond.com

Visit www.heart2heartwalk.org to find out more.

Caption:

Members of the Heart2Heart Walk planning team in Canberra last year with H2H Walk mascot Margie. Most of the group will start the walk from Lambert’s Centre of Australia on July 1. At rear, from left Stephen “Hoppy” Hopkin, Dave Copley, Alana Singleton, Pia Schindler, Vince Pannell, Pru Joy, Sarah U’Brien, Paul Batista; at front, Billy Brooks, Tammy Watson, Matt U’Brien, and Paul Milne.

The Heart2Heart Walk is an initiative of the National Heart2Heart Foundation, and its platinum sponsors are the Police Bank and the Australian Federal Police Association. Gold sponsors include Diverse Training Concepts, Raytheon Australia, Chelsea Wealth, Holan Group, and ACT Emergency Services Authority. Silver sponsors include the NT Police Association and the Australian Paramedics Association.

ENDS