



# **RESPOND WITH RESILIENCE**

**A Proposal to Strengthen the  
Resilience of the  
Australian Capital Territory's  
First Responders**



# Responding with resilience.

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**AUSTRALIA'S LEADING MENTAL HEALTH  
SUPPORT SERVICE FOR FIRST RESPONDERS  
AND THEIR FAMILIES.**

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# INTRODUCTION

We support first responders keep their communities safer





# Executive summary

Fortem Australia (Fortem) welcomes the opportunity to submit this proposal to the Barr Territory Government to strengthen the resilience of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)'s first responders.

In the ACT, first responders bear the weight of their vital role in the community, experiencing alarming levels of psychological distress, diagnosed mental health conditions, and even suicidal thoughts. The persistent challenges they face, whether in their day-to-day operations or the intensified pressures of disaster response and recovery efforts, require urgent attention.

Fortem, as Australia's leading and trusted national mental health, wellbeing, and career support service dedicated exclusively to first responders and their families, recognises the critical need for intervention. Our fundamental belief is that those who we honour for saving lives, should not have to hurt from helping us. Nor should their families.

To address this pressing issue, we seek a financial commitment from the ACT Government, outlined in the 2024 – 2025 Territory Budget. This proposal relates specifically to the workforce and families of the ACT Emergency Services Agency.

Within this proposal, Fortem has detailed a requested financial commitment of \$521,000 annually over a three-year period (\$1.563 million total), providing direct support to ACT first responders and their families under the banner of the ACT Emergency Services Agency.

This funding serves not only as a financial allocation but also as an investment in bolstering resilience, enhancing capability, and securing the retention of first responder personnel throughout the Territory.

ACT Government funding will yield significant positive outcomes for the lives of first responders and their families, contributing to the cultivation of a healthier and more resilient workforce. This, in turn, strengthens their capacity to protect and care for communities across the ACT, ultimately equipping them with the necessary mental health literacy to navigate the challenging conditions they encounter in their daily operations.

The journey toward a safer and resilient ACT is underpinned by allocating Territory funds to Fortem's program, ensuring the wellbeing of those who tirelessly safeguard our communities. This commitment is not just essential; it is an urgent and compelling priority that benefits all ACT residents.



# Why Fortem?

Fortem delivers independent and bespoke mental health support services that are trusted by first responders, their families and first responder agencies. We apply an evidence-based and bravely holistic approach which focuses on prevention and early intervention. Because when first responders are supported the way they deserve to be, we preserve and enhance the resilience they need to flourish and keep Australia safe.

Our evidence-informed programs have been developed in line with extensive research, and in conjunction with senior leaders of first responder agencies.

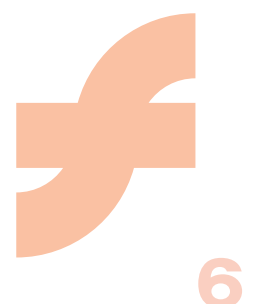
The preventative and early-intervention framework under which we operate, divides Fortem's offering into three unique, yet interconnected, branches of service delivery:

- Social Connection and Wellbeing Activities
- Clinical Psychology
- Career Management Programs

Together, this comprehensive approach to the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their families fosters resilience, empowering the first responder community to persist in safeguarding communities and ensuring the safety of all Australians. Fortem has supported tens of thousands of first responders and their families nationwide over a four-year period.

Throughout the last four years, Fortem has facilitated:

- 42,000 wellbeing activity registrations
- Almost 3,200 career management referrals
- And provided 7,300 psychology sessions to first responders and their families across the country





# What we know

Within the ACT Emergency Services Agency, 2,200 brave individuals stand on the frontlines to preserve lives and protect communities. This work is vitally important. It is also confronting, traumatic, and dangerous. Quite often, the demands of being the first to respond to others mean that first responders are the last to attend to their own wellbeing and that of their families. This sacrifice remains unspoken but undeniably profound. It is therefore imperative to direct greater attention to the overall health outcomes of ACT's first responders.

Due to their indispensable role in the community, first responders grapple with alarming rates of psychological distress, diagnosed mental health conditions, and suicidal thoughts, surpassing those of the general adult population and workers in other high-risk professions, such as the Australian Defence Force (Lawrence et al. 2018; Kyron et al. 2021).

Furthermore, consistent research underscores the elevated levels of exhaustion and burnout among first responders when chronic workplace stress is unaddressed. Reports indicate that up to 65% of first responders experience some degree of burnout (Drew & Martin 2022; Cole et al. 2018). Additionally, exposure to traumatised individuals and direct trauma exposure contribute to vicarious trauma, leading to compassion fatigue in up to 20% of first responders—a precursor to burnout if left unattended (Brady 2017; Burnett et al. 2020).

In a professional context, the individual, their immediate team, and the broader first responder organisation experience adverse effects such as reduced job performance, lower productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism, diminished organisational commitment, decreased morale, increased employee turnover rates, and heightened training requirements and costs. These outcomes result in service disruptions and a higher incidence of mental health injuries, significantly impacting operational resourcing, financial liabilities, and the organisation's ability to fulfill its objectives and support ACT communities (Drew 2022).

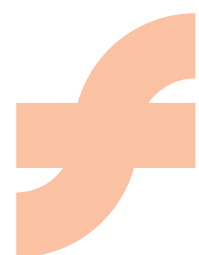
Tragically, first responder families are impacted by response work through 'spillover stress,' with many experiencing secondary trauma and stresses that cascade from first responder employment. This can lead to communication breakdowns in family relationships, promoting withdrawal, resentment, and hostility (Sharp et al. 2022).

Those we honour for saving lives and protecting our communities should not have to hurt from helping us. That is why Fortem leads Australia in delivering support to first responders and their families. Our tailored services, including social connection and wellbeing activities, confidential counselling, strategic career management services, mental health literacy resources, community engagements and workshops transform struggle into strength. We recognise that meaningful support requires a balance of science and empathy, combining the latest research with genuine lived experience.



Although it is recognised that both workplaces and the government bear the significant economic burden of mental health issues (Committee for Economic Development of Australia 2022), making investments in the mental wellbeing of the workforce is expected to generate substantial returns. Workplace mental health interventions have been found to yield returns on investment ranging from **\$1.30 to \$4** for every dollar allocated (National Mental Health Commission 2021).

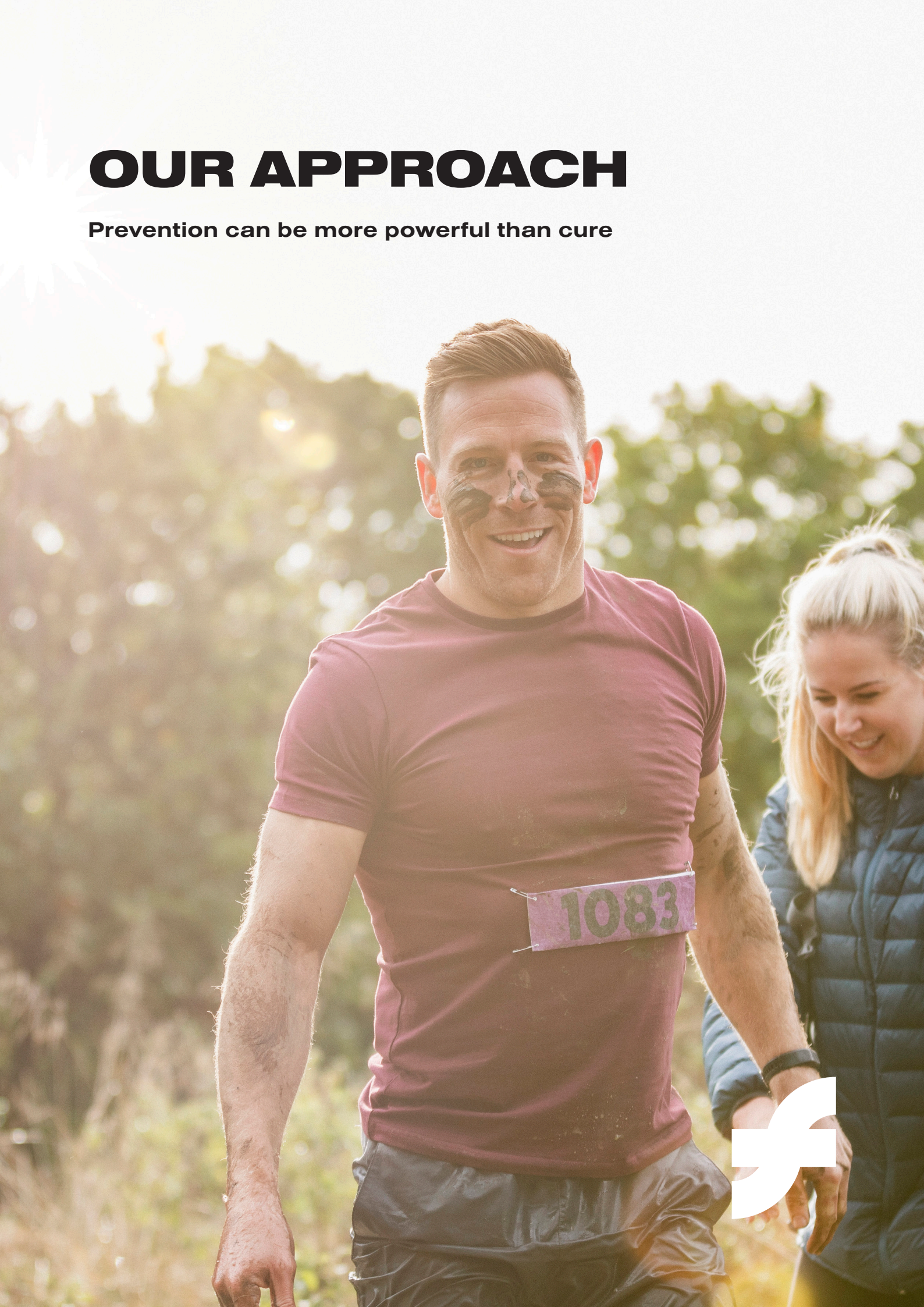
With allocated funding in the 2024 – 2025 Territory Budget, Fortem aims to expand support services in the ACT. This includes delivering a tailored program across eight regional locations, designed to enhance the resilience, capability, and career retention of the ACT first responder workforce.





# OUR APPROACH

Prevention can be more powerful than cure





# How we support first responders and their families

Fortem takes a proactive stance across the health spectrum, encompassing prevention, early intervention, intervention, and recovery. Our approach is rooted in evidence, lived experience, and data, addressing the unique vulnerabilities and engagement challenges associated with this sector. We maintain independence from agencies and worker's compensation systems, ensuring that first responders have low-threat, accessible, and varied support options when seeking help. This secures Fortem's ability to deliver the right care at the right time.

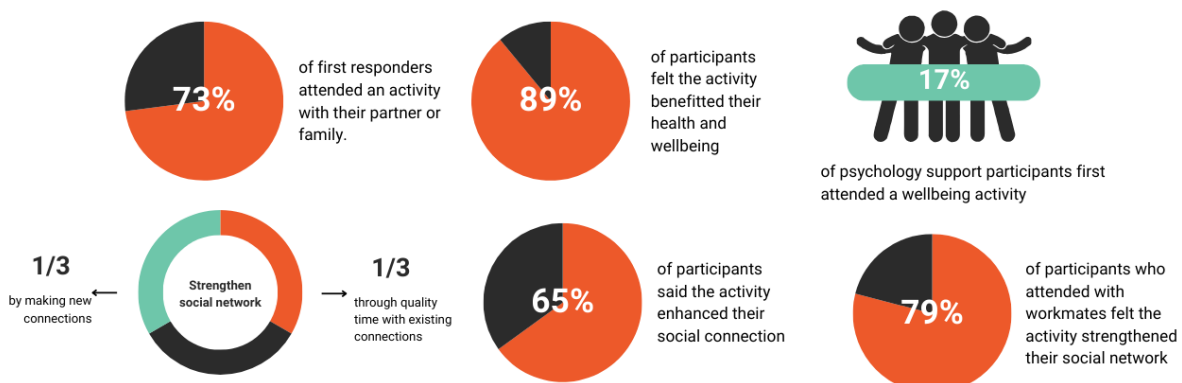
Our expert team, comprised of Clinical Psychologists, Career Management Specialists, and Community Engagement Coordinators, collaborates with first responder agencies and external research partners to continuously develop and refine Fortem's approach to supporting first responders through early intervention and preventative frameworks.

Based on extensive research and operational excellence, Fortem's service delivery is separated into the following offerings:

## Wellbeing activities

Fortem runs wellbeing activities designed to build both skills and social networks that position first responders in good stead in times of increased stress. Utilising an evidence-informed framework, Fortem provides a suite of in-person and virtual wellbeing and social connection activities to enhance resilience - not only in individual first responders, but also in family units.

Through a diverse range of activities, including cooking lessons, yoga, stand-up paddleboarding, and informal coffee catchups, Fortem cultivates social connections and promotes wellbeing. The ultimate goal is to empower individuals and families to self-direct and regularly incorporate wellbeing practices into their lifestyles, fostering resilience in individual emergency service workers, family units and work teams. Understanding that relying solely on theoretical health promotion is inadequate as a strategy for building preparedness and resilience, we acknowledge the importance of cultivating a tangible, shared experience of the advantages of investing in wellbeing. This is particularly crucial for a community that tends to be altruistic and self-stigmatising. Fortem's mission is centred around offering interest-based and wellbeing-focused activities as a means to encourage involvement, foster the promotion of seeking help and prioritising health, and achieving 'stealth health' outcomes.





Wellbeing and social connection activities play a crucial role in establishing networks of safety and support and are pivotal in preventing suicide and bolstering levels of resilience. These activities also serve as a gateway to support first responders and their families who may be unaware of their mental health needs or hesitant to address them (Hilbrink 2022).

By offering preventative health and wellbeing activities, Fortem establishes the groundwork for early detection and intervention in cases of mental health issues. Furthermore, these activities serve as an entry point to clinical services, providing access to evidence-based therapies for first responders and their families (Hilbrink 2022).

Social connection and wellbeing activities play an essential part in mitigating the negative effects of operational trauma and stress among first responders. Any resilience programs or wellbeing activities implemented for this specific sector should prioritise not just individual skills and physical activity, but also the strengthening of social networks, recognising the pivotal role of social connections in boosting the resilience of both first responders and their communities (Hilbrink 2023). This is the foundational focus of Fortem's wellbeing and social connection initiative.

## Psychology

Fortem provides evidence-based psychology support to first responders and their families. Access is convenient, with no need for a referral, and average wait times under four weeks. Fortem's nationwide integrated clinical service model reduces barriers to engagement, ensuring broad geographic coverage and seamless intake processes. Active waitlist support and care coordination enhance help-seeking translation, leading to higher rates of engagement.

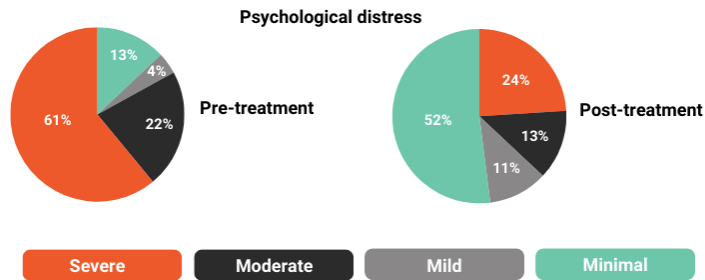
Operating independently of internal agency systems and the workers' compensation system - which is perceived as detrimental by four out of five first responders; Fortem's experienced psychologists and counsellors offer best practice evidence-based, culturally informed, confidential, accessible, and family inclusive care. It is crucial that individuals seeking help can independently access early intervention care without compromising their autonomy, often managing psychological distress while still being able to work. This is particularly vital for a sector facing challenges in attracting and retaining volunteers, both in voluntary and paid capacities.

The clinical team at Fortem expertly address the challenges faced by first responders and their families, recognising the interconnectedness of workplace and home stressors and the reciprocal impacts of both. Consequently, one in four psychology sessions are provided to first responder family members - a distinguishing factor from other service providers. Importantly, Fortem's services are customised to address the distinctive challenges encountered within this sector, distinguishing it significantly from other service providers.

The clinical services provided by Fortem consistently yield outstanding results, bringing about substantial enhancements in psychological distress and lifestyle factors. The reduction in PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms surpasses what is typically observed in general clinical treatment.

Fortem's clinical service spans from early symptom identification to addressing severe and chronic mental health issues. Fortem is actively involved in collaborative consultation, as well as the development and implementation of group-based psychosocial and wellbeing supports. These targeted prevention programs include mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, stress management for first responders, and family wellbeing for the families of first responders.

Participants in psychology and counselling showed improvements in:



## Career management

Fortem's Career Management Program plays a crucial role in service delivery. This program, distinguished by its focus on career maintenance (retention) and transition components, uniquely supports first responders and their families.

The Career Maintenance component, bolstered by supported case management, incorporates tailored workshops, seminars, self-paced learning modules, staff training, and a range of resources designed to enhance retention, boost individual and team performance, and foster overall wellbeing.

Simultaneously, the Transition component of the Career Management Program caters to the distinctive needs of first responders, emphasising a holistic approach to career transition and lifestyle planning. This facet provides robust support for individuals navigating subsequent career moves or transitioning into post-service life. The comprehensive case management services include interview coaching, assistance with resumes and job applications, guidance on networking, and support for transitioning into retirement. The program aims to facilitate a dignified exit, ensuring individuals comprehend the value they leave behind while transitioning from service.

Fortem Australia's Career Management Program uniquely addresses both the retention and transition phases of the first responder career journey. With its holistic approach encompassing career retention, key elements of wellbeing service delivery, and a focus on both individual and team effectiveness, the program stands as a pillar of support for Australia's dedicated first responders. Ultimately, it contributes to strengthening the resilience and effectiveness of those who safeguard our communities.



## Online wellbeing resources

Fortem places high importance on connecting the first responder community to accessible, quality, and relevant information that can promote insight, reflection, and help-seeking. With over 60 years of combined clinical experience, the subject matter experts couple real world knowledge, plain language explanation and first responder-specific clinical application with the lived experience that is embedded within Fortem.

The aim of these resources is to empower first responder families with research-informed information that highlights and normalises the experiences and challenges of first responder life. Fortem collaborates with both internal and external stakeholders to develop new, relevant, and timely resources that provide first responders and their families with the knowledge and skills necessary to better understand the impacts of first responder work.

## Thank a First Responder Day

Fortem also spearheads a National Day of Action each year in June - Thank a First Responder Day. This initiative acknowledges the work of first responders and links them to expressions of gratitude felt by the community, while acting as a day to celebrate first responders within the community with various events and activities across the day, and weeks precluding and proceeding.





# The Fortem difference

Fortem's innovative approach combines skills training with social connection and wellbeing activities, enhancing the sense of support, community, and consolidation of learning. These initiatives expand the scope of addressing mental health vulnerabilities through a proactive and early intervention approach, eliminating the need for individuals to seek help only when they are already unwell.

While other organisations seek funding to initiate similar efforts, Fortem already possesses and can scale these initiatives. Fortem's leading position is underlined by its comprehensive, preventative, and community-focused approach, emphasising family inclusivity, clinical rigour, cultural competence, and extensive geographic reach. Importantly, Fortem's services are tailored to the unique challenges faced by this sector and delivered on the ground in regions that need it most, setting it significantly apart from alternate service providers.

Fortem has built a scale and service delivery model that is unmatched by any other provider in Australia through:

- Service delivery focus
- Prevention and early intervention model of delivery
- Community centric deployment by extending in-person support to disaster affected areas nationally
- Collaboration with the first responder sector
- Inclusivity of family units
- Cultural competence



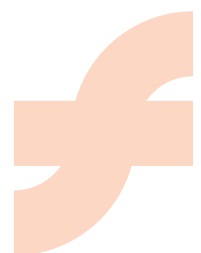
# Hear it from our first responders

*“You have made me feel okay to ask for help, I have struggled at times but am currently coping but I now feel if it gets bad I have somewhere to go which will be safe and worthwhile.”*

*“I had two very large and significant PTSD episodes in quick succession of each other earlier this year. Through both of those experiences it became clear that I needed additional support, and that’s when I got a referral to Fortem. They recognised that I needed to speak to someone very soon and connected me to the psychology and counselling team. Since then, I have seen my clinician on a weekly basis, and we are now seeing that I am experiencing Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). Had it not been for Fortem, I wouldn’t have been on top of a lot of things like my PTSD and the general stressors of firefighting. Without Fortem I also simply wouldn’t have the money to spend on going to therapy each week. I also appreciate that because Fortem’s services are emergency services/first responder specific, my clinician is not fazed by the experiences, feelings, and thoughts that I share with her. I tell her how I am feeling, and she is able to work through it with me.”*

*“I used to have a real reluctance to access counselling services. I would become anxious in the lead up to the appointment and often cancel it. It felt clinical and uncomfortable. I feel like Fortem’s program is really innovative and exciting. I look forward to their events and I come away feeling happier and uplifted. I will certainly access more support services through Fortem.”*

*“I am currently using every aspect of Fortem’s services. I do this because it’s important to me to have opportunities to connect with my children through Fortem’s wellbeing activities. With shiftwork, I’m always tired and it’s quite hard to find opportunities to come together as a family. Fortem helps me do this. I also access Fortem’s psychological services, and choose to access external support from Fortem, as there is still a lot of stigma about accessing internal supports from the Queensland Police Service. I’ve been working with a Fortem Psychologist for a while now, and she has been amazing. I’m the biggest fan of Fortem. I feel a massive sense of relief for Fortem’s support. After accessing Fortem’s services, I have a fire in my belly that I haven’t had for the longest time, and I’m now really quite excited for the future. There’s a lot of unhappy people in the Police Service, so I’m urging them to connect with Fortem, so they have access to the support they need.”*





# FUNDING PROPOSAL

Expanding Fortem's footprint in the Australian Capital Territory





# Financial commitment

Fortem is seeking a financial commitment of \$521,000 annually for a three-year period, totalling \$1.563 million from the portfolio of Fire and Emergency Services – Minister Mick Gentleman MLA. This funding is intended to provide direct support to enhance the resilience of personnel within the ACT Emergency Services Agency.

This proposal seeks to secure funding from the ACT Government to expand and improve existing federally funded support programs. These programs currently face limitations due to capacity and registration caps. The proposed use of new Territory funds is to address these limitations and enhance the effectiveness of the current Commonwealth funding arrangements.

It is crucial for Fortem to obtain funding to extend its reach throughout the Territory, ensuring that essential services are provided to individuals dedicated to safeguarding communities across the region. By investing resources in Fortem, the ACT Government has the opportunity to significantly improve the wellbeing, operational effectiveness, and retention of both frontline and administrative personnel in emergency services, as well as their families.

Furthermore, allocating funds for Fortem's program in the Territory Budget for 2024/2025 will offer frontline personnel and their families increased choices, alternatives, and better access to essential mental health support through Fortem's comprehensive services. Ultimately, this initiative directly contributes to cultivating a healthier workforce among first responders, thereby enhancing their ability to protect and care for the community of the ACT.

Throughout this multiyear program, Fortem proposes to deliver the following:

## Wellbeing activities and workshop events

With yearly funding from the ACT Government, Fortem aims to conduct approximately 288 additional culturally sensitive social connection events and workshops annually. These initiatives will offer 2,640 registration opportunities for ACT Emergency Services Agency personnel and their families. Allocating numerous registration opportunities to personnel and their families is essential, as significant improvements in social connection and overall wellbeing cannot be achieved through a single event. Maintaining continuous engagement and providing multiple avenues to connect through an effective and trusted model are imperative. Therefore, it is vital to allocate thousands of opportunities annually to personnel and their families throughout the ACT.

## Clinical Services

Through investment from the ACT Government, Fortem will provide approximately 960 additional psychology sessions each year to ACT Emergency Services Agency personnel and their families.



## Career Management

Annually, with financial support from the ACT Government, Fortem will offer targeted career management assistance, focusing on both career retention and transition. Utilising a Case Management model, the program is expected to conduct over 490 case management sessions annually for both operational and corporate personnel of the ACT Emergency Services Agency, providing significant opportunities for career management support.

## Overall service provision

Through financial backing from the ACT Government and encompassing wellness activities, workshops, clinical service delivery, and career management support, Fortem will provide direct assistance to ACT Emergency Services Agency personnel and their families through over 4,000 engagement registration opportunities each year.

Over the three-year funding period, the total number of engagement opportunities amounts to over 12,000 representing comprehensive and overlapping opportunities for the over 2,200 full-time and volunteer personnel and their families affiliated with the ACT Emergency Services Agency.

Securing funding is essential for Fortem to broaden its impact across ACT, ensuring the provision of vital services to the dedicated individuals safeguarding communities territory wide. By allocating resources to Fortem, the ACT Government has the opportunity to markedly enhance the wellbeing of first responders and their families. Furthermore, funding Fortem's program offers frontline personnel and their families expanded choices, options, and improved access to crucial mental health support. Ultimately, this initiative directly contributes to fostering a healthier first responder workforce, strengthening their capacity to protect and care for the ACT community.



# Rationale for funds sought

There exists a significant opportunity to position the ACT at the forefront of national progress through delivering sound, ethical and effective wide-scale support to first responders and their families across the territory. With approximately 2,200 ACT Emergency Services Agency personnel and considering the average Australian prevalence rate of 21% for mental health challenges, the ACT Government should anticipate that an estimated 462 individuals from this cohort will require mental health support services each year.

It is widely recognised that first responders and their families are hesitant to utilise internal support services provided in the workplace (Lawrence et al. 2018; Ridders & Lawrence 2021; The Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Education and Employment References Committee 2019). The entrenched stigma associated with mental health conditions serves as a prominent barrier to accessing timely and appropriate wellbeing support. First responders are less likely to seek support if they harbor stigma around their own mental health or perceive a lack of genuine commitment from their agency in addressing mental health in the workplace (Britt & McFadden 2012; Gulliver et al. 2019; Haugen et al. 2017; Ridders & Lawrence 2021).

Another impediment for many first responders is the perception that in-house services provided by agencies are insufficient, and seeking internal support is seen as a decision that could limit or end their careers (Britt & McFadden 2012; Gulliver et al. 2019; Haugen et al. 2017). As a result, first responders may find greater comfort in confiding in and engaging with external support organisations. To ensure that individuals have a range of internal and external supports available, first responders must feel empowered to access independent and community-based services.

Therefore, it is crucial for an evidence-informed, culturally appropriate organisation, such as Fortem, to offer external community-level services. This ensures that first responders in the ACT and their families receive suitable and ongoing mental health support, thereby granting them access to services that resonate with their needs while minimising barriers to engagement.

## The economic impact of mental health in the workplace

The financial burden of mental illness, estimated at around \$70 billion annually on the Australian economy, was underscored in the 2020 Productivity Commission Mental Health Inquiry.

Additional costs related to disability and premature death amount to an extra \$150 billion per year due to mental illness, with a significant portion considered preventable (Productivity Commission 2020). Workplace risk factors, including job demands, autonomy levels, equity, incentives, exposure to trauma or threats, and job insecurity, contribute to mental health challenges. These challenges result in reduced workplace participation, increased absenteeism, and 'presenteeism,' with losses in productivity and participation ranging from \$12.2 billion to \$39.9 billion per year (Productivity Commission 2020; Committee for Economic Development of Australia 2022).



The first responder sector is particularly affected, where compounded trauma exposure, workforce demands, and a strong sense of duty hinder overcoming mental health distress (Lawrence et al. 2018; Kyron et al. 2021). Employee Assistance Program (EAP) utilisation within the first responder community is notably lower compared to workers' compensation claims. Fortem addresses this gap by strategically positioning services between EAP and workers' compensation systems, providing accessible and nonthreatening support, significantly supporting the mental health needs of first responders. The substantial economic impact is borne by both workplaces and the government (Committee for Economic Development of Australia 2022).

However, investing in the mental health of the workforce is likely to yield substantial returns. The Productivity Commission's Inquiry revealed returns on investment ranging from \$1.30 to \$4 for every dollar invested in mental health interventions of workers and industries. Positive influences on workplace mental health fall into the categories of Protect, Respond, and Promote (National Mental Health Commission 2021).

Fortem contributes significantly to these positive influences through social connection activities, clinical services, career management support, mental health literacy initiatives, and strategic partnerships with likeminded external organisations to maximise reach and impact of Fortem services.



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