

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this beautiful land we meet upon. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and to any first nation people present today.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate today – in particular to Deb Parkinson and Women’s Health, long-time supporters and companions on this journey.

My name is Donna Wheatley and I am here today representing the fire services as part of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. I first began working with MFB in 1998 and have had 16 years’ operational experience – “catching trucks” as I used to say – but I can’t say that anymore; I recently took the plunge, and the great opportunity, to undertake development and promotion to the rank of Commander; MFB – and I hope I can say EMV and the wider EM sector – have been celebratory in acknowledging the first, I hope of many, achievements of women into the top 5% of the operational workforce. Women in formal leadership positions has been a long time in the making – although women have been leading in the sector in many ways, with commitment and courage for years. Because of her we can.

My professional background, before operations at MFB, was in community services – as a Gestalt psychotherapist working in Family services with specialisation in family violence and sexual assault. So I come to the Victorian Fire Services with quite a unique lens. This, undoubtedly, has influenced my particular interest in this work – and all the other great work Women’s Health do, particularly with the Gender and Diversity Pod.

Because of who I am and the opportunities I have had, I have had a twenty-year professional and personal interest and investment in community and capacity development – including a 10-month deployment with DFAT in the Philippines as an Australian Volunteer for International Development and many years as an “early adopter” of Diversity and Inclusion within the fire services.

I only indulge in sharing this in order to assure you of my “street cred” in speaking today. I can take it as assumed that most of you will give me “credit” simply because of the uniform I wear today – a privilege many of us in uniformed services can fail to see. As it’s been said: The biggest privilege of our privilege is that we don’t even see it. When one doesn’t have the privilege the inequity becomes much more apparent.

Because of this, I know to listen intently to the community members we serve in our day to day work – in order to meet them and respond to their needs in our interactions. This research provides us – you, as community organisations, policy makers and decision makers – me as part of the emergency services who respond, who help people, communities, to prepare for, survive and recover from emergencies.

It provides for us the data of the deep-listening, over many years (perhaps the longest time of any research of its kind in Australia) of the lived experience of endurance and recovery from disaster.

This research, like many, utilises the conceptual term “resilience”. It is still a nebulous term – although we use in our Shared Vision: “Safe and more resilient communities”, and in our daily descriptors and explanations, we still battle with the contentious nature of the work, as do the subjects in this research. The report gives us some deeper descriptions from the

lived perspective. As a person who has committed my career to supporting or increasing community resilience, it is a gift to have shared in these personal experiences in order to better inform my professional practice. With a deeper exploration of people's resilience we will have a deeper understanding of our own vision in the EM sector.

I love the term, coined by Brene Brown: "Story is data with a soul". This research provides us with privileged insight from the 56 participants about what helps and what hinders resilience in the face of disaster.

I would like to acknowledge the courage and the efforts of each participant. To show up and share of ones' self in situations like these we are learning from takes a vulnerability and commitment I admire. I don't imagine anyone reads these stories shared without the rising of goose bumps, or the lump in the throat that comes from witnessing the raw human experience they illustrate.

Class, gender, rurality, race, sexuality and ability all impact on capacity for resilience. We know that disaster amplifies individuals' vulnerabilities – a regression to gender normative behaviour, increase in family violence, the presentation of co-morbidity complexities all increasing.

I was struck by the statement from the report: Gendered roles and expectations are so ingrained that 'choices' can remain unnamed and unexamined. I ponder; how does this affect the way we meet our communities in times of emergency or disaster? Who we are as a service provider – still the relatively homogenous and perhaps stereotypical group, meeting people that we might make similar assumptions about – that they are "the same as me", if we haven't really considered the difference as well as the similarity, the stereotypical as well as the unique, in our own tams and in the people we support. One size does not fit all. The only thing "one size" does is make people shrink from their full being and capacity.

Another theme that was "sticky" for me, as for many, is that of "get over it". With some lived experience of trauma and very close relationships with loved ones deeply affected by Black Saturday it shocks me to hear the participants' experience of these expectations. There is no fast track to getting over it. With the right supports there can be growth from these experiences - and the research articulates the presentations of post traumatic growth, however, the foundations our communities begin with, the way in which we meet them in our response activities and the supports they receive as they transition to recovery, are integral to the better outcomes following disaster.

Following the Black Saturday royal commission the FSRP articulated many actions for improvement. I can reflect on the ways our organisation now better understands the impact our response and transition to recovery processes have on our community, in their long term recovery. We better work with communities, and representative agencies, to prepare with our communities. The processes for transition to resilient recovery are better articulated, understood and implemented. We have multiple transitions from response to recovery every day across the metropolitan district and I am assured that we are actively learning and improving on the great service we delivery to people – on what can be one of the most difficult days of their lives.

The way we hold and navigate the transition with affected people can have long, and far reaching impacts. The research outcomes launched here today, and many before it, illustrates this clearly.

Within the fire services I want to see increased understanding of these factors across all levels of the organisation. Responding crews need the education and awareness of these issues. MFB proudly hosted the pilot program of the “Lessons in Disaster” training modules. The four programs were delivered to representatives from the whole EM sector at our training centre – all agencies came together; learning these lessons Women’s Health provided on LGBTI, FV, men and gender equity in disaster.

MFB has demonstrated increased efforts in all areas of diversity and inclusion – within our community and within our organisation. There is still much work to be done but a growing program or work – including our participation in Mid-Summa Pride, our engaged efforts as part of the 16 days of activism, our celebration of 30 and 35 years of women in operations, our lead on an EM wide IWD event at Federation Square, the appointment and training of family violence contact officers and organisational wide training in mental health literacy are initiatives implemented by MFB in an optimistic and action oriented 6 months of work.

This is a most optimistic time for change – with the difficulty of disequilibrium comes the opportunity to challenge long entrenched paradigms and create a better future for our organisations and the communities we serve.

I am personally invested in creating a more diverse and inclusive fire service in Victoria to better reflect and support our community. I am being the change I want to see in the world.

Alongside the recommendations put forward, the call that this research makes to all of us – is remember “what predominantly helped was people”

We as privileged, empowered, good people in this room can take action.