

Evidence-informed guidelines for tracking trauma exposure can help emergency services organisations protect worker mental health



Alexandra Howard¹, Dr Loretta Watson¹, Dr David Pedder¹, Anita Savic¹, A/Prof Tracey Varker¹, Dr Kit Huckvale², Courtney Bowd¹, Prof Nicole Sadler¹

¹ Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, University of Melbourne, Victoria

² Centre for Digital Transformation of Health, University of Melbourne, Victoria

Toward best practice for tracking potentially traumatic events exposure and organisational responses in emergency services

Emergency services workers are exposed repeatedly to potentially traumatic events (PTEs). Emergency services organisations use various approaches for tracking such exposure however, there is a lack of evidence-based guidance for doing so. Grounded in Australian and international industry expertise, this project developed and trialled a framework of potential good practice principles for PTE tracking systems.

Background and aims

Due to the nature of their roles, fire and emergency services personnel may be repeatedly exposed to potentially traumatic events (PTEs). Tracking PTE exposure can enable organisations to manage psychosocial risk and support the mental wellbeing of high-risk workers, however there is limited guidance for doing so. This project aimed primarily to develop good practice principles and implementation approaches for systems to track worker exposure to PTEs and organisational responses to exposure.

Methods

Phase I: Best practice review

- Literature review & expert consultation
- Define tracking system elements (Fig. 1)
- Sector consultation (survey of current practice; N=22 agencies)
- Thematic analysis

Phase II: Develop good practice principles

- Drafting good practice principles
- Workshop consultations
- Project Management Committee review
- Finalisation of principles

Phase III: Develop implementation and monitoring resources

- Workshop consultations to develop audit tool and monitoring and feedback plan

Results

Literature review: No evidence-based best practices for tracking PTE exposure were identified, but literature was used to *Define tracking system elements*: Elements are shown in Fig.1. **Sector consultation:** Of the agencies surveyed (N=22), 64% used a PTE tracking system and 73% tracked organisational responses to PTE exposure. Just over half (57%) of systems were rated as performing well in relation to their intended purpose while 21% were underperforming. There was much variability in system elements.

Figure 1. A Framework of PTE Tracking System Elements



Impact: Translation for practice

A key output of the project is the [Good Practice Principles Guide](#) (Howard et al., 2025) endorsed by the Australian and New Zealand Council for fire and emergency services (AFAC). Agencies can use the *Guide* to review existing systems and make decisions on future designs. Supporting implementation of the principles is the *Tracking System Audit* (Pedder et al., 2026) that agencies can use to identify strengths, gaps, and priorities concerning their systems. Finally, the *Implementation Monitoring and Feedback Plan* (Bowd et al., 2025) was developed to support review and refinement of the principles for future iterations of the *Guide*.



For additional information scan the QR code or contact:
Alexandra Howard, Director, Disasters and Public Health Emergencies,
Phoenix Australia Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health
ahowa@unimelb.edu.au

