

4 July 2019

## **ROADS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO VICTORIA'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM**

### **Introduction**

Roads Australia (RA) is Australia's peak body for roads within an integrated transport system. We bring industry, government and the community together to lead the evolution of Australia's roads, integrated transport and mobility networks.

The nation's only roads champion, Roads Australia's 150+ members include all of Australia's road agencies, major contractors and consultants, motoring clubs, service providers and other relevant industry groups. Roads Australia strives to achieve a robust integrated transport system that values and invests in all land transport modes, including roads, vehicles, freight, public transport, rail, cycling and walking. Roads Australia upholds the principles of a safe, inclusive, sustainable, economic and socially valuable roads industry for all Australians.

### **Roads Australia and Mental Health**

Roads Australia recognises the prime importance of mental health in our industry and welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Our Strategic Plan outlines our role to promote support for, build awareness of, and help to improve mental health in our sector. We are proud of the people that comprise our industry, and the contribution they make for all Australians. We are strongly of the view that this economic and social contribution must not compromise their mental health nor their wellbeing. Improving mental health is not only important for our workforce, but also their families and communities.

As part of this submission, Roads Australia includes supporting statements about the importance, urgency, and shared commitment to addressing and improving mental health outcomes in our industry from some of our members.

### **The Need for Urgent Action**

#### Global Perspective

Roads Australia considers that Australia has until recently failed to recognise the importance of mental health in our society, and particularly within the workplace. This year the World Health Organisation (WHO) named depression as the leading cause of disability worldwide

and the major contributor to the overall global burden of disease. The WHO stated that 300 million people suffer from depression globally<sup>1</sup>.

### Industry Perspective

Our industry is not exempt from the global statistics, with depression and mental illnesses prevalent in the transport sector, particularly in construction. Like many other OECD countries, suicide is one of the major causes of death amongst men in Australia<sup>2</sup>. Suicide rates are significantly higher among individuals employed in male-dominated professions such as construction, compared to other occupational groups. One of the main reasons for these high statistics is that, in comparison to most Western countries, Australians work longer hours (averaging 44-45 hours per week)<sup>3</sup>.

Research shows that, **every year, 190 Australians who work in the construction industry take their own lives**. This means **we lose a construction worker to suicide every two days**<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, **construction workers are six times more likely to die from suicide than an accident at work**<sup>5</sup>. **Our young workers are two times more likely to commit suicide than any other young Australian**<sup>6</sup>.

Significant stigmas around mental health are still common in the construction industry. According to the organisation *Mates in Construction*, our workforce finds it difficult to open up to colleagues and talk about their feelings. Pride has been identified as an important issue, with men stating they have a problem with being perceived as not manly enough if they speak about their feelings<sup>7</sup>. These stigmas mean that many at risk men do not show any visible prior signs of depression or of intending to take their own lives.

### Further Research

In 2018, a discussion between a small group of Roads Australia Fellows (a RA program to develop our next generation of industry leaders) highlighted the common challenges they and their colleagues were facing as they performed their jobs during the biggest construction boom Australia has seen. They approached their employers, and this led to eight Roads Australia members investing in what we believe is the first industry-led research into mental health in the infrastructure construction industry.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation, (2018) 'Depression' <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>

<sup>2</sup> Miler et al., (2017) 'Male Suicide among construction workers in Australia: qualitative analysis of the major stressors precipitating death' the University of Melbourne and Deakin University. Accessed at: <http://matesinconstruction.org.au/commitment-to-evidence-base-practice/evidence/>

<sup>3</sup> Downey, L. & Stough, C. (2018) 'Measuring the psychological impact and work related stress and related occupational factors in the Australian infrastructure construction industry' - Swinburne University of Technology

<sup>4</sup> <http://matesinconstruction.org.au/about/why-mic-exists/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://matesinconstruction.org.au/about/why-mic-exists/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://matesinconstruction.org.au/about/why-mic-exists/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://matesinconstruction.org.au/about/why-mic-exists/>

The study, *Measuring the Psychological Impact and Work-Related Stress and Related Occupational Factors in the Australian Infrastructure Construction Industry* (attached) was conducted by Associate Professor Luke Downey and Professor Con Stough from Swinburne University.

The research comprised a state-wide survey (between May and June 2018) on the mental health of construction professionals. Responses to the survey were received from 683 respondents from eight major construction/infrastructure companies, broadly representative of the industry<sup>8</sup>. To measure the impact of stress and other occupational factors in the infrastructure construction industry, the survey focused on six key assessments of mental health: mood disturbance, physical health, stress, work-life balance, and the incidence of burnout. The findings were consistent with the national research outlined earlier and demonstrate the severity of the mental health challenge we face.

*Key Findings*<sup>9</sup>:

- Average levels of depression, anxiety and stress exceeded population norms by 40% for depression, 38% for anxiety, and 37% for stress.
- Between 62-71% of respondents returned “normal” levels of mental health (for Depression, Anxiety and Stress ratings), indicating that between 29-38% of the employees taking part were suffering from psychological illness; compared with 18% of the Australian population.

Levels of “mood disturbance” were 2.5 times higher than the normal population and exceeded those reported by psychiatric patients seeking treatment.

- Experience of three particular negative moods (Depression, Anger and Fatigue) exceeded the normal population by a factor of 2 to 3. Consistent exposure to negative mood states can precipitate to clinical levels of psychological distress.
- Levels of physical health complaints were observed to be 50% higher than the normal population and worse than the comparison populations (Civil Engineers & Correctional Officers). With 68% of respondents exceeding the threshold limit score that indicates the likelihood of psychiatric illness.
- 75% of respondents are suffering from moderate to high levels of stress.
- 46% of respondents met the criteria for being burnt-out, in comparison to the normal population rate of 28%.
- 64% of respondents reported working over 50 hours per week. Notably, extremely high rates of Project Directors (100%), Project Engineers (86%), Project Managers

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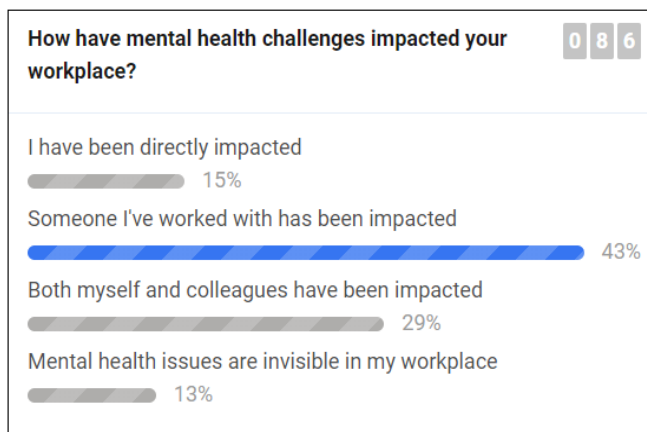
<sup>8</sup> Downey, L. & Stough, C. (2018) ‘Measuring the psychological impact and work related stress and related occupational factors in the Australian infrastructure construction industry’ - Swinburne University of Technology

<sup>9</sup> Downey, L. & Stough, C. (2018) ‘Measuring the psychological impact and work related stress and related occupational factors in the Australian infrastructure construction industry’ - Swinburne University of Technology

(82%), Senior Project Engineers (83%), and Site Engineers (82%) report working in excess of 50 hours per week.

- In contrast to the general population in which 20% of people report be dissatisfied with their work-life balance, 59% of the respondent's endorsed being 'unsatisfied' with their level of work-life balance.

In addition, Roads Australia conducted a survey at our *Spotlight on Safety* Forum on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2019. 86 respondents from industry answered an anonymous survey conducted on smartphones. Our results showed 87% of respondents had either been personally affected or knew that one of their colleagues had dealt with mental health challenges. The remaining 13% considered mental health issues invisible in their workplace.



### Industry Context – The Big Build

The Victorian Government is committed to delivering a \$38 billion infrastructure agenda over the next four years in a project pipeline that will last at least ten years. This investment will create jobs and boost social and economic development<sup>10</sup>. However, a significant percentage of the workforce we are relying on to deliver these positive outcomes are suffering from serious mental health challenges. Understanding workforce requirements is essential in order to deliver Victoria's significant infrastructure pipeline. Hence, addressing mental health urgently is key to ensuring a safe, well and productive workforce in Victoria.

### Industry Action – Roads Australia Members

Roads Australia members have already taken action in order to prevent and support mental health challenges in the workplace. Some of these practices listed below can be replicated by other companies and can be reinforced by the Government's support.

#### AECOM

AECOM has focused on creating a supportive, positive and safe workplace for all its employees. Initiatives like line manager training, R u Ok? campaigns and Work/Life Balance Day are promoted by teams in each of their offices located across Australia and New Zealand. These initiatives have helped raise awareness around mental health and have helped provide a safer and more supportive workplace<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Office of Projects Victoria, 'Building the Pool: Jobs and Skills Coordination Hub' Discussion Paper

<sup>11</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'

<http://www.consultaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

## Arcadis

Arcadis' award winning 'Positive Living' program was created from the region's 'Wellbeing by Design' program which was launched in 2010 in response to raising awareness. This program is targeted to their employees' wellbeing and focuses on three main areas: work environment, positive leadership, and physical and mental health. These programmes aim to:

- improve understanding and awareness of mental health,
- support employees living with mental health,
- continue to foster an antibullying culture,
- combat stigma, and
- promote positive and proactive mental health and wellbeing.

Important initiatives and programs like EAP support, line manager training, employee surveys, flexible working arrangements, and wellbeing stewardship meetings have been implemented in the company in order to provide support for all staff<sup>12</sup>.

## Aurecon

Aurecon formed a Mental Health committee and developed a program called 'Mind Matters'. The objectives of this program were to raise awareness of mental health and the impact on the workplace, provide mental health first aid, and reduce existing stigma through understanding<sup>13</sup>. Aurecon currently has over 90 Mental Health First Aiders across Australia and New Zealand. Aiders create open discussion spaces, have the skills to recognise the signs of mental illness and to initiate conversations with people who may be struggling with personal issues. Moreover, the company has also completed line manager education and awareness sessions in order for managers to be able to have conversations with those struggling with mental illness<sup>14</sup>.

*"A mentally healthy Aurecon is better for everyone, which includes first and foremost our people and their families. We are taking proactive action to support our people to take care of our own mental health and to support conversations with someone who we may be concerned about. I fully support Aurecon's Mind Matters Mental Health Program and to personally contributing to breaking the negative stigma that often comes with mental health issues."*

*Bill Cox, CEO, Aurecon*

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<sup>12</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

<sup>13</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
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<sup>14</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

## DCWC

DCWC has implemented their Employee Assistance Program which provides a confidential counselling and referral service through Converge International. This program is confidential and free (up to three consultations) for their employees, counselling and assistance can be accessed 24 hours 7 days per week, and appointments can be made face-to-face, by phone or online. In addition, DCWC advertises phone numbers from Beyondblue and Lifeline through flyers that can be found in common spaces like bathrooms and kitchen<sup>15</sup>.

## Golder

As part of Golder's Asia Pacific Mental Health strategy, a model comprising prevention, promotion and intervention has been created. This model has allowed Golder to become a more inclusive and diverse organisation, implement flexible work arrangements to ensure they are meeting staff's needs, incorporate wellness checks as part of mentoring relationships and discussions, and to develop manager and supervisor skills in identifying signs and symptoms of mental health illnesses<sup>16</sup>.

## Jacobs

Jacobs is a company that has been implementing mental health initiatives for more than a decade. These initiatives are composed of different workshops run by Beyondblue, and training for managers in order to identify the signs of stress-related mental illness in the workplace. Jacobs has also developed an EAP program to provide counselling services for their employees, and the 'Mental Health Matters' program which runs a series of sessions with the objective to build resilience for all employees and managers. Furthermore, this company has created the initiative 'Your Mind Matters Toolkit' which enables staff to access all of Jacobs mental health resources. All these programs and initiatives have successfully provided the help and support needed to many of Jacobs' employees<sup>17</sup>.

## SMEC

Over the past couple of years SMEC Executive Committee has strongly focused on its employees' mental wellbeing. The company has focused on different programs and initiatives such as, the annual sponsorship of wellbeing events like R U Ok?, an EAP program that allows access to all staff and family members, workshops in collaboration with Beyondblue and BUPA, the promotion of a positive work culture that emphasizes constructive and positive

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<sup>15</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

<sup>16</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

<sup>17</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

behaviour, and the empowerment of their Leadership Development Program in order to create a Mental Health strategy for the business<sup>18</sup>.

### Tonkin

Tonkin considers that delivering performance in a safe environment is essential. CEO Gerry Doyle has written several articles outlining his personal experiences managing chronic depression in a bid to reduce stigma and encourage others to share how they are feeling and to seek support if needed<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, managers have been trained in how to have a conversation with someone who may be struggling with personal issues<sup>20</sup>.

### **Industry Support for Action – Roads Australia Members**

In support of Roads Australia's submission to Victoria's Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, RA members provided the following statements in recognition of the importance, urgency and shared commitment to addressing and improving mental health outcomes in our industry.

### Amey

*"There are so many triggers to good / bad mental health, we don't know what's happening in a person's family life, outside of work. We need to encourage and make it easier to access people to speak to, when help is needed. Employers need to be genuine and consistent with approach to work life balance and supporting healthy minds in the workplace."*

- Mario Sabila, Principal Engineering Manager

### Major Transport Infrastructure Authority (MTIA)

*"MTIA is committed to supporting all people working on the MTIP to have a workplace that actively minimises risk to mental health, promotes positive mental health and wellbeing, is free of stigma and discrimination, and supports the recovery of workers with mental health conditions, for the benefit of the individual, organisation and community."*

- Anne Taylor, Director Strategic Safety

### McConnell Dowell Constructors

*"Mental health and well-being at work is extremely important to ensure that when you get home you are in the right frame of mind to deal with your family and the all the difficulties it*

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<sup>18</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

<sup>19</sup> <https://tonkin.com.au/insights/mental-health>

<sup>20</sup> Consult Australia 'Striving for Mentally Healthy Workplaces'  
<http://www.consultaaustralia.com.au/docs/default-source/skills/striving-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces---web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

*sometimes brings. I just think it so important to go home in a positive frame of mind, so you can give the family your best.”*

- Executive Support Leader and Office Manager/45/Female.

*“If you haven’t got that right state of mind, stress and anxiety from work will overflow into your home life, so, it is extremely important.”*

- Commercial Manager Australia/49/Male

*“I think mental wellbeing is at the core of who we are as people and I think it is often neglected, so, to be able to feel comfortable that the environment we are in whether it is at home or at work, appreciate that you are not always going to be at your best from a mental perspective. I suppose create a stable environment to be who you are really and so the ability to be who you are at work might allow you to be who you need to be at home.”*

- Group General Manager IT/39/Male

*“We work in a very high-pressure industry, projects are very large, the demand on peoples time is very high, and that very much creates a pressure cooker environment in our organisation. As a construction organisation we are no different to our peers in the industry. So, we now need to be very careful how we approach our work and life balance. I know from my own experiences I take on a lot across our wide portfolio of issues across our projects and tenders for the objective a building a successful business. That can be very pressurising, and I go home thinking about that. I think about it at work, when I am not at work, when I am with the kids in the park and it can be all consuming. Its Taxing, its mentally taxing.”*

- Executive General Manager - Engineering, Technology and Innovation/45/Male

*“The construction industry has been recognised as an industry with a high level of poor mental health attributable to high levels of stress, working away from family and friends, shift patterns and a predominantly male workforce. The importance of work-life balance in addressing some of the mental health issues has been demonstrated and this is a key area which the construction industry can influence. Moving to a 5-day working week, considering the shift rosters for remote workplaces and recognising the impact of family events on workers are just some of the ways that, we as members of the construction industry, can have a positive impact on mental health.”*

- Executive General Manager HSEQ /Female.



## MinterEllison

*“Organisations across Australia, regardless of size and industry sector, are facing an increase in mental health issues among their workforce populations. As employment lawyers, our team is witness to the manifestation of mental health issues often after things have reached a crisis point. Crucially, there is an opportunity for organisations to cast a critical lens over their operations and identify their key risk factors and high-risk roles. This will allow programs to be appropriately tailored to achieve better outcomes when managing mental health in the workplace.”*

- Joelle Grover, Workplace Partner

## Office of Projects Victoria

*“We have a unique opportunity to make a significant positive step-change in the culture of the construction industry. Through setting a new industry standard on government-led projects, proactively reducing stress levels to allowing for a more even work life balance, we can improve the working conditions and health and wellbeing of the workforce undertaking the biggest infrastructure build Victoria has ever seen. Currently, the construction industry has the highest rate of suicide of any other industry in Australia and is one of the largest employers in the nation. This is a matter of national significance and I believe we can tackle this together.”*

- Dr Collette Burke, Victorian Chief Engineer

## Ventia

*“Mental health is one of the most important issues society must continue to support. We all have an obligation to look after each other’s wellbeing and employers play a particularly influential role in this.”*

- Christian Frost, EGM SHEQ

## **Roads Australia Position and Recommendations**

We strongly support Victoria’s Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. With one in five Australians experiencing mental health conditions in a given year and the same proportion of workers taking time off work because they feel mentally unwell<sup>21</sup>, **Roads Australia considers addressing mental health in the workplace must be a national priority.**

Noting the recommendations of the Swinburne University study, we believe that urgent action and investment in mental health programs is needed in our industry and all industries. Roads Australia is currently working with our members to consider these challenges and determine

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2007)  
<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/latestProducts/4326.0Media%20Release12007>

the best ways to collectively address them. However, we are of the view that while industry has an important role to play, government has the greatest opportunity and responsibility to drive positive change at scale.

Roads Australia considers that investing in mental health programs is strongly justified given work-related stress costs the Australian economy an estimated \$14.81 billion every year<sup>22</sup>.

This includes promoting mentally healthy behaviours through procurement processes (such as consideration of 5 day weeks and longer delivery timelines) and investment in industry-wide programs that are:

1. Prevention focused;
2. Create systems level change;
3. Collaborative (including in partnership with industry and community);
4. Sustainable;
5. Support knowledge creation and dissemination;
6. Encourage innovation<sup>23</sup>; and
7. Easy to find, accessible and affordable to all.

### **Concluding remarks**

Improving mental health in the construction and transport industry will ultimately enhance Victoria's economic performance and productivity, as well as support thousands of Victorians and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission. Should you wish to query any points in this submission, please contact Executive Director Policy and Government, Natalie Collard, [natalie@roads.org.au](mailto:natalie@roads.org.au).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M Kilgarriff', written in a cursive style.

**MICHAEL KILGARRIFF**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
Roads Australia

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<sup>22</sup> Medibank (2008) 'The Cost of Workplace stress in Australia'  
<https://www.medibank.com.au/Client/Documents/Pdfs/The-Cost-of-Workplace-Stress.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/workwell>