

Victorian Government Response

to the Inspector-General for Emergency Management's *Review into Preparedness for Major Public Health Emergencies including Pandemics and Review of Victoria's Emergency Ambulance Call Answer Performance*

August 2022



Justice
and Community
Safety





The Victorian Government accepts the findings of the Inspector-General for Emergency Management's (IGEM's) *Review into Preparedness for Major Public Health Emergencies including Pandemics* (the Major Public Health Emergencies Review) and its *Review of Victoria's Emergency Ambulance Call Answer Performance* (the Ambulance Call Answer Review).

Both reviews provide critical insights into our preparedness for and response to the COVID-19 pandemic and opportunities for continuous improvement – something we are working hard to deliver alongside our healthcare and emergency services workers every single day.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented in its scale and duration and impacted the lives of and livelihoods of every single Victorian. Tragically, more than 5000 Victorians have lost their lives impacting many more in the families and friends they leave behind. Our hearts go out to all those who have lost loved ones and we commend the resilience all Victorians have shown during this difficult time.

Our health and emergency services personnel have been pushed to their limits as the global pandemic has put health systems around the world under never-before-seen pressure. We acknowledge the extraordinary commitment and dedication of our health and emergency management personnel in keeping Victorians safe.

Throughout these extraordinary challenges, we remain committed to learning and improving so future Victorians will not have to endure the same experiences.

The Victorian Government supports-in-principle the seven recommendations from the Major Public Health Emergencies Review and the eight recommendations from the Ambulance Call Answer Review.

Since these reviews commenced in 2021, the Victorian Government has continued to build on its investments across the healthcare system and made significant investments in immediate and practical measures to build the capacity of our emergency management and health sectors.

We've also progressed work on related reviews and inquiries that will go some way to addressing these findings. We'll waste no time bringing this important work together and will continue strong collaboration with IGEM throughout this reform process.

In responding to these experiences and subsequent reviews, we will have a clear, coordinated and strategic reform agenda and be better prepared for our next major public health emergency, whatever form that may take.



IGEM's Review of Preparedness for Major Public Health Emergencies including Pandemics

The Major Public Health Emergencies Review examined Victoria's planning and preparedness for major public health emergencies using the State's COVID-19 pandemic response in 2020 as a case study.

The review also considered preparedness in the context of a range of other public health emergencies, such as heatwave, air and water contamination, thunderstorm asthma and other forms of communicable disease.

While the review acknowledges the unprecedented scale and duration of COVID-19 and adaptability of the sector, IGEM makes seven recommendations, 41 findings and 30 observations that point to areas for sector-wide improvement. These include:

Enhancing support for those most at risk in our community

IGEM points to a need to improve how the Victorian Government identifies and supports those most at risk in our community before, during and after emergencies.

The report also finds that Victoria's ability to support all Victorians was inhibited by a lack of leadership by the Federal Government at the time.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities

IGEM points to the need to ensure there is a clear, consistent line of control in major public health emergencies and that individuals have the appropriate authority to enact the various control, coordination and consequence management accountabilities afforded to them. IGEM also recommends resolving conflicting roles and responsibilities between the *Emergency Management Act 2013* and other relevant acts or emergency management documents.

Abolishing classes of emergencies

IGEM recommends abolishing the current classification system of emergencies as either Class 1, 2 or 3 and in prescribing future arrangements to ensure that there are not changes to the Chief Commissioner of Police's role in the control and coordination of security-related emergencies, nor the hazards assigned to control and support agencies for response.

IGEM considers this will reduce confusion and perceptions of a hierarchy that impact levels of preparedness and resourcing across emergencies.

Strengthening consequence management

IGEM identifies existing strengths in managing consequences including existing critical infrastructure resilience arrangements, but IGEM also reflects on the challenges of managing whole-of-government and whole-of-community consequences and the importance of clear escalation pathways.

Improving workforce planning

IGEM points to the challenges in scaling existing localised surge workforce plans to meet the demands of a sustained major emergency.

IGEM also highlights the importance of strengthening workforce public sector mobility and developing contingencies for when the capacity of the department and the Victorian Public Service is exhausted.

Building leadership and workforce capability

IGEM broadly points to a lack of awareness about plans that were prepared prior to the onset of the pandemic. IGEM notes the importance of improving awareness of emergency management arrangements across government and ensure arrangements are regularly practised.

Many of these findings are well known to the sector having been identified through reviews and inquiries since 2020 or through the sector's own debriefing and lessons management processes and work is well underway to address these lessons.

Work underway to address these critical recommendations from IGEM

New Health Emergency Sub-Plan and Viral (Respiratory) Pandemic Sub-Plans have now been developed with input from the health and emergency management sectors. These draw on the findings identified by IGEM to improve the management of this and future pandemics (recommendation 2).

Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) is currently leading a Governance Review with the emergency management sector to assess the adequacy of Victoria's current statutory



governance arrangements. The review is being undertaken in two phases.

The first phase will clarify roles and responsibilities (recommendations 2, 3, 4 and 7) including control arrangements for the public sector's response to a major emergency, and the powers of the Emergency Management Commissioner to ensure effective control arrangements are in place during emergencies. It will also clarify the definition of a 'major emergency' and the triggers for activating State control arrangements.

The second phase will build on the outcomes of phase 1 to progress abolishing classes of emergencies within Victoria's *Emergency Management Act 2013* (recommendation 7), whilst ensuring clarity of accountabilities and robustness of decision-making during major emergencies.

The Government is also delivering a range of initiatives to uplift capability and capacity, so we are better prepared for our next emergency including future pandemics.

We've developed tools and advice to support emergency management planners to better identify and consider the needs of those most at risk before, during and after emergencies (recommendation 1). A community of practice will develop communication and engagement strategies that will guide and support implementation of this recommendation.

We're strengthening the complexity and frequency of our scenario exercise program and ensuring our arrangements are regularly practised (recommendation 6). We're working with communities to exercise the Victorian Preparedness Framework and test different high impact scenarios, departments are exercising emerging threats such as foot and mouth disease to ensure the State is ready to scale up as required, and we're participating in the new national exercising program run by Emergency Management Australia at the federal level so we're best placed to tackle emergencies that transcend borders.

We know workforce mobility is a critical issue for large-scale events. Departments are developing surge workforce plans to balance continuity of service with the demands of major emergencies. The Public Sector Administration Committee is

also actively working to advance workforce mobility issues (recommendation 5).

We are also undertaking an Emergency Management Operating Model Review to ensure our emergency management sector can scale up to meet the challenges that will face us into the future (recommendation 5).

The Government has asked the State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC) to consider work underway and identify whether additional actions are needed to deliver on the Major Public Health Emergencies Review recommendations.

All departments, EMV, Victoria Police and the Municipal Association of Victoria are members of SCRC and IGEM is an observer. Members will work closely with local government and service providers to prioritise and resource the rollout of any existing urgent actions. Any new actions will be communicated in the Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2023-26.



IGEM Review of Victoria's Emergency Ambulance Call Answer Performance

IGEM's Ambulance Call Answer Review examined and assessed both Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority's (ESTA's), Ambulance Victoria (AV) and the broader emergency management sector's planning and preparedness for a major surge in emergency ambulance calls due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The review assessed how the sector forecast and mitigated the call surge, service delivery requirements and impacts on patient outcomes.

The Ambulance Call Answer Review found a high level of proactive planning to protect workforces and prepare the system for waves of infections over a prolonged period. However, IGEM found there were systemic issues that prevented ESTA effectively scaling to meet unparalleled demand in late 2021.

While IGEM notes ESTA's call activity significantly increased following the first COVID infections in Australia, 2021-22 was the busiest year ever for emergency ambulance calls to triple zero with an increase on the previous year of 12 per cent.

IGEM identifies 40 potential adverse events involving seriously ill and injured patients between 1 December 2020 and 31 May 2022, many of which involved call answer or dispatch delays and in which 33 people did not survive.

While the impact of call answer delays on patient outcomes will be a matter for the Coroner, the loss of any life is a tragedy and our deepest sympathies are with the families and friends of loved ones lost during the pandemic. IGEM makes eight recommendations, 42 findings and nine observations that speak to opportunities to ensure the sustainability of ESTA's operations into the future, improve patient outcomes, and restore confidence in ESTA's services. These include:

Delivering a more sustainable funding model

While IGEM notes longstanding work by the government to address financial sustainability, IGEM points to the importance of delivering a sustainable funding model that reflects the increasing demand on ESTA due to Victoria's

changing demographics and the increasing frequency and severity of emergency events.

Community understanding of 000

IGEM notes community education about emergency call service, including when to call 000, needs to be an ongoing part of demand management and a priority for all agencies.

The report highlights the value of the Save Triple Zero for Emergencies campaign and other community education that the government ran through the pandemic.

Creating a multi-skilled workforce that is strong and well

IGEM finds ESTA's resourcing challenges were exacerbated by the limited number of multi-skilled call-takers and inflexible rostering. These also had impacts on broader staff wellbeing.

Strengthening collaboration and coordination

IGEM found considerable evidence of collaboration between AV and ESTA and the broader health and emergency management sector. However, IGEM identifies opportunities to ensure ESTA is more formally integrated into emergency management arrangements moving forward. IGEM also points to opportunities to advocate for changes to national triple zero call answer policies to minimise the chance of callers losing their place in the call priority queue.

IGEM's findings are consistent with those made by the ESTA Capability and Service Review (the Ashton Review) led by Mr Graham Ashton AM APM.

The significant investments the Government has made in Victoria's healthcare system and emergency services, including over the last 12 months in uplifting ESTA's capability and capacity and leadership, will help address these recommendations.

Because Victorians should have the confidence that when they call for help in an emergency, they will get it.

In October 2021, the Government provided \$27.5 million to address increased pressure and demand, caused by the pandemic. This included strategies to boost immediate call-taking and dispatch capacity during surge periods, immediate technology solutions to make services more efficient, increased training for existing



staff, and the delivery of a targeted workforce recruitment campaign.

In March 2022, a further package was announced focused on recruiting and training more ambulance call-takers and providing greater and better workforce support, such as additional trainers, managers and more administration support for the challenging and vital job they do.

In May 2022, the Government provided a \$333.4 million investment in call taking and dispatch workers, delivering better support to workers with more training, stronger governance and better technology systems to improve call answer performance. This provided further wellbeing support to our hardworking frontline staff.

This investment has stabilised ESTA's immediate funding issues and provided greater security for its workforce. Empowering ESTA to build a stable workforce is already having a positive impact on ESTA's call answer performance.

To complement this investment, we also announced a \$12 billion Pandemic Repair Plan to deliver more staff, better hospitals and first-class care. This included \$124 million to put around 90 more paramedics on the road and improve patient flow to help unclog emergency departments and prevent ramping. This investment follows the recruitment of more than 700 paramedics in 2021.

We are investing in a range of primary care initiatives to keep pressure off hospitals and meet the growing demand for ambulance services. A further \$162 million was invested in July 2022, delivering improvements to Ambulance Victoria's operations, making sure patients are taken to hospital quickly, and freeing up our paramedics to get back on the road faster.

This investment also supports the delivery of system-wide improvements for hospitals to handle increased demand. This includes the specialist staff to help offload, assess and treat patients faster and help progress patients more efficiently through their care journey.

Building on the \$14.3 million announced in August 2022 to deliver five new GP-led Priority Primary Care Centres, a further 25 urgent care services will be established to ensure people are

connected to the care they need while easing pressure on emergency departments.

In responding to the Ashton Review the Government established a clear implementation pathway for delivery of a reform program for ESTA.

This included establishing a Government Taskforce to oversee delivery of all 20 recommendations in the Ashton Review.

The ESTA Reform Program Government Taskforce (Government Taskforce) is jointly chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Chief Executive Officer of ESTA and includes departmental Secretaries from the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Treasury and Finance and Department of Health, along with the Chair of the ESTA Board and the Emergency Management Commissioner.

An Operational Taskforce and a Workforce Taskforce will support the delivery of this program of work. It will comprise members from emergency service organisations and industrial stakeholders, who will provide advice to the Government Taskforce on how reform will impact operational service delivery and workforce.

The Government Taskforce will also work through IGEM's recommendations as part of this existing reform program, to further streamline our commitment to genuine reform, ensuring that we deliver a sustainable triple zero call service for all Victorians.

The government has previously committed to delivering on all 20 recommendations within the Ashton Review by December 2023, and IGEM's recommendations will now be delivered in conjunction with this existing work program.

In May 2022, work commenced to support the delivery of recommendations arising from the Ashton Review, with ESTA working closely with its workforce and industrial partners to strengthen processes, policies, training and rostering. All recommendations have been scoped, with implementation focused on those that improve call taking and dispatch services.



[Work underway to address critical recommendations from IGEM](#)

Recommendation 1

ESTA has increased participation at the national level and is building strong relationships across the sector. This includes inter-jurisdictional working groups with other state and territory agencies and increased cooperation with the Commonwealth and Telstra. Through this engagement, ESTA will advocate for improvements to our national triple zero call answer policies.

Recommendation 2

There has been significant work by ESTA and AV to better prepare for surge events and these improvements will be communicated publicly through their annual reports.

Recommendation 3

ESTA and AV are already making progress on pre-hospital services and information sharing and further work will be progressed through the Operational Taskforce.

Recommendation 4

The Government has developed an emergency management sector outcomes framework and will include measures for all service types (that is, ambulance, police, fire services) and from a whole-of-system perspective.

The Government is continuing work to clarify roles and responsibilities as part of its ongoing emergency management Governance Review.

Recommendation 5

Updates to the State Health Emergency Response Plan will be identified by the Government Taskforce in consultation with the State Emergency Management Planning Committee.

Recommendation 6

The community education campaigns on the use of Triple Zero including the 'Save Lives by Saving 000 for Emergencies' campaign was relaunched in 2021 and additional funding was provided in March 2022. Education campaigns are already having a noticeable positive impact on triple zero call volumes.

Recommendation 7

Work with unions and staff to ensure our workforce has the support it needs to deliver their vital work in keeping Victorians safe is

continuing. An MoU has been agreed to with unions to drive greater roster flexibility and support ESTA to meet demand. Additional team managers have been recruited to ensure staff have appropriate support. ESTA and AV have also implemented dedicated programs for staff health and wellbeing across their organisations. The Workforce Taskforce will provide advice on opportunities for further research and work to deliver best practice.

Recommendation 8

ESTA has commenced assessing Victoria's Recorded Voice Announcement requirements into the future drawing on the range of significant emergencies we face. This work will be progressed through the Operational Taskforce.

The Government Taskforce is responsible for ensuring comprehensive work is undertaken to advise government on ESTA's longer-term funding needs. This work will look beyond funding requirements to meet current service demand, to enable ESTA to continue to have the capability and capacity to respond to emergencies across Victoria.

There is more to do to deliver on these complex recommendations. The significant work already undertaken by ESTA, AV and the broader health and emergency management sectors means we are well-placed to deliver meaningful long-term reform and improve service outcomes.

Moving forward, we will track the progress and deliver on the intent of these recommendations.

The Government Taskforce will work closely with IGEM to ensure that these recommendations are effectively implemented.

The Victorian Government thanks IGEM for these two comprehensive reviews and all those who contributed to their development.

The Victorian Government also recognises the incredible efforts of ESTA staff, paramedics and all healthcare workers, working under the strain of the pandemic to deliver care for Victorians.

We look forward to continuing to work closely with the emergency management and health sectors to deliver reform for the benefit of all Victorians.