

## **2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System**

### **What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?**

"While it is heartening to see that the issues of mental illness and suicide are finally receiving the attention they deserve from Government and the community at large, the issue of train-assisted suicides remains in the 'shadows'. What for me started off as a desire to lobby Government on this issue to reduce the impact of these incidents on emergency services personnel, has become somewhat of a passion for me; as my work on this issue has unearthed not only the extent of the issue but the impact it is having on many sections of our community; combined with the Government's apparent complete lack of understanding of the problem and what could be done to minimize the impacts of these events. Firstly, the number of deaths in Victoria is closely guarded by Government and Metro, to the point of almost being treated as a secret. My inquiries (through the engagement of Government, NGOs & the media) suggests that the number is somewhere between 50 and 150 deaths per year. The only public reference to a death on our rail system is the 90 minutes or so that the Metro site lists a line as being suspended due to ""a person being struck by a train"". In effect this is the amount of time it takes for emergency services to attend and for the body to be removed from the tracks and services resumed. Longer, if State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers are called in to search sections of the track to recover body parts - which occurs on average two or three times a year for my SES Unit (Moorabbin). Interestingly, I have also found a number of journalist who share my concern regarding this issue, however, they are reluctant to 'go to print' for fear that their stories may somehow influence people to take their own lives using a train (or at least their Editors do). (Now that I have provided some background information) to answer the question posed: we need to bring suicide out of the 'shadows', not only train-assisted suicide but all suicides. There is an outdated belief held by some that a problem not discussed is a problem that will disappear or improve. In my opinion the exact opposite is true. For example there are plenty of examples of where we have acted to address problems within our society: did we not act to place a fence on the Westgate Bridge, do we not discuss our drug issues (safe injecting room) or the road toll (spending \$millions per year to reduce it)? The key to this issue is what you say and the message you deliver - our focus needs to be education, support and awareness. But this is only part of the equation for train-assisted suicide, and I will elaborate in further sections about an overall strategy to address this issue. "

### **What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?**

"What is not working well with train-assisted suicides is the fact that currently there is effectively no strategy in place to prevent these death and as a consequence none of these person could be offered any hope of a subsequent intervention strategy, because they are already dead. In summary, if you plan to take you own life by being hit by a train, then there is nothing stopping you except, in some areas, a 1.8 meter fence, which you could easy scale or walk around. I have developed and proposed to Government a monitoring and physical intervention strategy to reduce

the number of train-assisted suicides (details provided below). And while my engagement with Victoria Police, Police Association, AmbVic, SES, Metro etc. has been encouraging there is one important 'ingredient' missing, and that is the input of the Government. Interestingly, after several letters to the Government, and meetings with PTV, I was invited to Transport for Victoria just prior to the last election to discuss joining a panel to address this issue - unfortunately I heard nothing more post the election. It is also worth noting that one of the key drivers for my initially petitioning of the Government is the impact these types of incidents are having on emergency services workers; and their mental health. With an average of 20 VicPol, MFB, CFA, SES attending each scene, there are between 1,000 and 1,500 officers subjected annually to one of the most horrific types of scenes they can attend (just image the impact of having to gather body pieces of a 15 year old girl who after being bullied for years runs to the train-line and jumps in front of a train (in this case she had left a note for her parents, who found it and ran to the line only to see that she had already been killed). And of course there is the impact on train drivers, who should be upper most in our minds."

### **What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?**

"Firstly, it is unreasonable to expect to be able to eliminate this type of incident altogether. However, it is reasonable to expect to see a reduction in the order of at least 30 - 50 % (50 or so lives a year). As I mentioned earlier the only strategy currently in place is to install 1.8 meter fencing along some sections of track. There is current funding of \$5 million to install 20 kilometers of fencing. This is despite that fact that fencing can be easily avoided and it is placed near railway stations and there is evidence that Victorians (unlike their New York counterparts who tend to jump from a subway station in front of a train) take their own lives on sections of track in 'poorer' socio-economic areas - typically at points furthest from the CBD, e.g. Frankston and Werribee. In summary my strategy involves combining detection technologies, such as taught wire fencing, with 'active' video monitoring. This strategy is not unlike what you would find in a custodial environment but at a fraction of the price. For example: we know (Metro has this data and has shared it with me verbally) that a majority of train strikes occur during peak hours (presumably trains are running express) and at locations near the end of a line. So by focusing initially on these areas the expansive network suddenly becomes more manageable. Then install taught wire fencing (there are several types: one that detects climbing and one that detects wires being stretched to allow a person to move through the fence) in known high-risk areas, which when activated would activate a fixed camera. This then provides real-time monitoring of a train-line and allows for instant action to be taken by the Control Room (notify drivers in the area). Drones are also a technology which can be used to view a particular stretch of line once a fence wire has been 'activated'. This, when compared with installing 1.8 meter fencing, is a relative cheap, permanent, real-time and active monitoring system. The beauty of this system is that the 'trespassers' will not even know how they were detected (cameras are hidden or drones are at height)."

### **What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.**

Not relevant

### **What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?**

Not relevant

**What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?**

Not applicable

**What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?**

Not applicable

**What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?**

Not applicable

**Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?**

"There needs to be more end-to-end focus and coordination. While there is focus on the identification and treatment of mental health issues, by the time some persons get to the point where they have decided to take their own lives there is little allocation of resources and focus - particularly train-assisted suicide where there is no focus or resource allocation (it is completed reactive). "

**What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria's mental health system and support improvements to last?**

"We need a body that oversees end-to-end management of the mental health system. While there are forums where various parties are represented e.g. Department of Health, VicPol etc., the very fact that the current situation with train-assisted suicide exists means that this issue is not being addressed satisfactorily. This body needs the appropriate mandate, authority and discrete funding to investigate, introduce, manage, review and oversight a whole-of-Government end-to-end process."

**Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?**

"I have spent the past two years dedicating my time and effort to raising the profile of this issue with Government and petitioning it to take some action. Unfortunately, the sum result so far has been the receipt of some Ministerial correspondence 'drawing my attention to the the fencing program they have in place (which is totally ineffective given numbers of deaths are likely increasing not decreasing) and its partnership with Tracksafe (where money is being invested in educating train station staff to identify potentially suicidal persons at stations (when the evidence clearly shows incidents do not occur anywhere near stations). Just this week, there have been at least three (3) - presumably fatal, train strikes, two of these have been on the Werribee line (source: Metro website). Quite frankly I am somewhat amazed and frustrated that it has been so difficult to achieve any real progress in this space. Everyone I have engaged, be it senior emergency service representatives, the Police Union, NGOs (even Tracksafe) and senior Government representatives from PTV and Transport for Victoria agree that this is a significant issue and needs to be addressed. But, for some reason, the Government seemingly has absolutely no meaningful focus on this issue and I actually don't know why - surely it can't just be

cost driven. As far as I know I am the only person lobbying the Government on this issue (I base this on the conversations and correspondence I have received through my lobbying efforts). When I have met with various representatives they are very interested in the staged strategy I have developed around detection technology and active camera arrays (fixed, mobile or drone); leading up to the potential deployment of Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) cameras mounted on trains. My strategy is staged in terms of technology, locations deployment and cost. Simply deploying a taut wire and camera strategy solution to parts of the Werribee line (even as part of a proof of concept exercise) would most likely lead to an immediate saving of lives. As a community we are rightly concerned about the protection of vulnerable groups and we accept that Governments have a duty to protect these groups. Each year we spend tens of millions in an effort to reduce the road toll. In a rail setting, we devote significant resources to graffiti detection and removal, both in terms of money and technology (drones and fixed/mobile camera arrays). Governments by their very nature are cumbersome and slow to react (and have to manage limited financial resources), hence the need for 'extraordinary forums' such as a Royal Commission to focus attention on coordinated, appropriate and funded solutions. In the Mental Health space there is so much which requires your attention, especially given the breadth of issues which require consideration and review. But in my opinion there is nothing more important than the protection of life, and I do not accept the Government's apparent position that 'the problem is too hard to address'; 'the rail network is simply too large' or 'fencing will reduce deaths'. In my view, we are simply not doing nearly enough to protect this vulnerable group in our society. It cannot be understated that if we continue with the current strategy (or lack of it) we will continue to see many more vulnerable members of our society (likely in excess of 100 per year) continue to lose their lives without the possibility of intervention strategies - many of them teenagers. This situation for me is completely unacceptable and I hope that you share the same view. My staged strategy would be relatively easy to roll out, inexpensive and would have an immediate impact. Every week that we as a community do nothing another two or three people will die; on average another 40 - 60 emergency services personnel will be called to these scenes - many never recovering from these incidents; two or three train drivers will have to live with the unimaginable memory of a person looking up at them as they are struck and there are the scores of family and friends who have to live with what could be preventable in many cases. While I have been someone critical of the Government my strong view is that they are the solution not the problem and as such I would welcome the opportunity to work with them to prevent these deaths. I would also be more than happy to provide further details to the Commission if required."

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you once again for taking the time to discuss my concept. Since our telephone conversation I have reviewed the email I sent to the Minister, which only contains a high level summary of one possible hi-tech camera solution. In fact, there are a number of other potential strategies I would like to explore as part of this concept. In preparation for our meeting I thought it might be helpful to provide some additional information about the background, 'drivers' and approach for my proposal.

Firstly, by way of background I am a former member of the Victoria Police (VicPol) and a current volunteer member of the State Emergency Service (SES). I have attended a number of train-assisted suicides whilst with VicPol and my SES unit is currently averaging about one train death every two months.

The motivation for my proposal has many facets and none is more important than trying to reduce the number of train deaths, and in particular those young persons who make such a tragic decision to end their lives in this way.

However, I am equally motivated by the need to reduce the impact these types of incidents have on emergency services personnel. On average there are about 50 train-assisted suicides in Victoria per year. For each of these deaths there is one directly affected train driver and on average about 20 emergency services personnel from the Police, Fire Services (MFB & CFA), Ambulance Victoria and SES. If that is extrapolated out for a one year period, a total of 1,000 personnel are directly impacted (including many who are involved in multiple events).

My goal is not only to reduce the number of victims but also reduce the number of rail employees and emergency service personnel impacted by these types of events. I believe that we will reach a critical point in time, if we are not there already, when organisations such as Metro, VicPol, MFB etc. will have their operational capabilities substantially degraded to the point that it will impact on their service delivery capabilities (It is quite likely that the number of employees currently suffering psychological injuries as a direct result of this type of incident or where they are a contributing factor, is considerable).

I believe that our best attempts to date to address this situation have largely failed to have any real impact on the situation. I do not believe that additional fencing, in itself, is the answer. That is unless it is sufficient in size or shape to act as an impenetrable barrier – and there is probably no political will to have razor wire installed across the network.

We do, however, have a number of other options available to us including cameras, video and detection technologies. My background is also with the Department of Justice and through my time managing the private prison contracts (Port Phillip Prison and Fulham Correctional Centre), I have developed a detailed understanding of what is potentially available in these environments (technology which is not necessarily cost prohibitive).

I believe it is simply unacceptable to hold the view that there is nothing we can do about it. "There is just too much track and the cost would be prohibitive".

I believe we need to adopt a 'glass half full' approach. Yes, there are large expanses of track that need to be monitored. However, if we were to adopt a risk management approach to determine which areas are most likely at greatest risk, the lengths of track become much more manageable. If we then take into account historical data about where there are clusters of incidents, then this area

is further reduced (it has been my experience that for some reason particular sections of track are used by multiple persons). All of a sudden we have key areas across the network which are at the highest risk and therefore require prioritization.

My proposal centres on a staged implementation approach. However, before this takes place further engagement with researchers, health professionals, railway operators and emergency service personnel would be essential to developing a greater understanding of behavioural and operational aspects.

Phase One of my proposal involves:

- identifying several sections of track along the one train line which are assessed as being at the highest risk
- introducing the most appropriate but relatively low cost monitoring options
- monitoring these track sections at key times to minimise cost

Phase Two involves:

- 'rolling' this monitoring solution out to other high risk areas of the rail network

Phase Three involves:

Exploring/Introducing more high-tech solutions, for example:

- Sending camera/video feeds to monitors at a station immediately prior to a section of track for a driver to review when stopped (monitors similar in style to the ones which currently exist at Toorak Station)
- live camera/video feeds into a driver's cabin – as they travel along footage from several hundred metres in front is fed live to the driver cabin

There is also the possible deployment of other complimentary technologies, for example:

- taught wire on top of existing fencing to indicate someone has scaled a fence
- pressure sensing wire on fencing which indicated when someone is climbing a fence
- point to point laser beams (microwave would be cost prohibitive) which show that someone has entered an area
- use of drone technologies

All of these would need some type of 'active' back-to- base monitoring.

In addition to this all monitoring technologies would need to be housed/installed discreetly. It is important to the success of any strategy that a person intending to take their life using a train is not aware that they are being monitored.

There are significant behavioural difference between those intending to take their own lives and those whose presence in an area raises general concerns. That said, it will always be better to have times when there is, in hindsight, an unnecessary reduction in the speed of a train, rather than running the risk of misinterpreting a person's motives. But this would most likely be seen by train drivers as a positive rather than negative intervention.

Success of the program should also be based on the number of fatalities (including all train strikes) not measuring preventions or 'near misses'. The program will be successful if the number of persons struck is reduced (perhaps by a target percentage) each year.

This strategy would require significant commitment in terms of time. Realistically, it should be expected that an effective strategy will be developed after a period of trial and error. In addition to this, it is most likely a combination of intervention strategies will prove most effective, both in terms of prevention and cost. It is also likely that a bespoke solution or combination of solutions will be required for different sections of track. Another important consideration is that there are a variety of trains in service – incorporating different technology requirements - and this is likely to continue.

I think it is also important to note that particularly for the young, if the opportunity to end their life with a train is removed, then it does not mean they will automatically chose to do so in some other way. I think it is more complex than that. If this were so, wouldn't we see young persons running in front of cars on a freeway? I think that with suicide it comes down to an individual's suicide plan and for many this involves a train. For some, if not many, if these persons were identified and taken into protective custody by authorities than their death may be avoided all together.

In conclusion, I am passionate about this issue and I want to use my Project Management and Contract Management background (including Procurement & Tendering) to bring this concept to reality. We cannot continue to accept that 50 deaths per year are acceptable because it isn't. I have written to all of the emergency services unions, Rail Union and State and Federal Governments. I was particular encouraged to receive a letter back from the Victoria Police Association supporting my endeavours. I have also received some (unofficial ) positive feedback from a senior officer within Ambulance Victoria.

An individual with the right skill set, 'drive' and funding could make a real difference. If we can reduce the number of deaths by just 30% we potentially save 15 victims, as well as the life-long impact this type of incident will have on 15 train drivers and an estimated 300 emergency service personnel. My expectation is that in time, this number could be reduced to a substantially higher number.

In terms of the cost, to engage a large company to bring this concept to reality would be prohibitive. However, I believe that for a modest financial outlay an effective strategy could be put in place with real results. In the long term, these learnings might assist in Victorian rural areas, other Australian jurisdictions or possible beyond our borders.

Once again, thank you for your time and any advice you may have regarding any aspect of my proposal.

Regards

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### **Business Case (Summary): Reducing Train Fatalities**

*On average a person is fatally struck by a train in Melbourne every week, with the overwhelming majority of these incidents deliberate acts of 'train-assisted suicide'.*

*The impact of these incidents upon Metro Train staff, emergency services personnel and families of victims are significant. As a former member of Victoria Police and serving volunteer member of Victoria SES I have seen firsthand, on many occasions, the horrors of this type of call-out.*

*While it is unrealistic to expect to totally eradicate this type of behaviour, I believe it is possible to reduce the number of these incidents. A reduction of 20, 30 or 40 percent would have a significant financial, emotional and productivity saving for the community – not to mention the possibility of preventing some (particularly young people) from making this tragic decision to take their own lives.*

*Many of those directly involved are changed forever, and for some the impact is so great that they are unable to return to work. As our population continues to grow it is likely that these types of incidents will also increase, and in turn, we will reach a point where the prevalence of these incidents may eventually prevent Metro Trains and first-responder organisations from meeting staffing requirements due to sick leave issues.*

#### **Historical Situation**

Much has been done to date by Federal and State Governments and train providers such as Metro Trains (including significant new fencing programs and the removal of train crossings – the latter assisting in preventing accidental deaths).

However, more could be achieved through the use of the latest camera and video technology, which would assist drivers by extending significantly their field of view of the tracks ahead.

The very nature of the behaviour of persons intending to take their own lives brings with it some unique challenges. However, there are number of potential areas which could be the focus of attention to minimise the number of train strikes.

Firstly, there would seem to be some sections of track where multiple fatal accidents have occurred. In the past six months my SES unit has attended three separate fatal train suicides. These sections of track have all been the location of previous incidents.

I believe we need to adopt a 'glass half-full' approach. Yes, there are large expanses of track that need to be monitored. However, if we were to adopt a risk management approach to determine which areas are most likely at greatest risk, the lengths of track become much more manageable. If we then take into account historical data about where there are clusters of incidents then this area is further reduced. All of a sudden we have key areas across the network which are at the highest risk and therefore require prioritization.

The time of day is another factor. While train strikes do occur at all times of the day and night, many occur first thing in the morning or in the late afternoon (this may be somehow linked to the number of 'express' services - this may be a factor due to the speed of the train and the likely inability of the driver to be able to take evasive action).

While walking tracks located adjacent to railway lines bring pedestrians and trains into close proximity, it is likely that the behaviour of an individual intending to commit suicide would be readily identified as unusual. For example pacing, being agitated, or in one recent case setting up a video camera to film the event.

One of the principal advantages of the latest camera and video technology would be that the person would be unaware their behaviour was being monitored and therefore their true intentions could be more easily identify as being suspicious and Metro controllers alerted.

Another significant issue is the frequency of these types of events or more accurately their rarity. Everyday thousands of kilometres of train journeys occur without incident. This presents the unique challenge of being able to focus on those times when something is most likely to happen. This means that matching the right technology with the task at hand would be critical to the success of the project.

In addition to this, there is also the possible deployment of other complimentary technologies, for example:

- taught wire on top of existing fencing to indicate someone has scaled a fence

- pressure sensing wire on fencing which indicated when someone is climbing a fence
- point to point laser beams

### **Business Opportunity**

My proposal involves a number of preparatory steps and a staged implementation approach:

Phase One: Undertake research and data consolidation in order to determine the facts about train fatalities in Melbourne, including locations, time of day, other similarities etc.

Phase Two: Having drawn conclusions based on the available data, undertake a project to determine potentially suitable sites to act as ‘test sites’.

Phase Three: Deploy the most appropriate type of camera/video technology. This may eventually include a combination of technologies, taking into account locations, costs, useability etc.

For example it may be desirable to implement a fixed monitored system at first and later upgrade to video monitored live by train drivers. It may also be desirable to use a ‘heat-sensing’ systems (FLIR) which would identify heat signatures in heavy scrub. One system may not fit all applicable environments and of course the expense and functionality of any system would play an important part in determining how best to proceed.

The reality is that there are numerous technologies currently available which would prove effective, but there are equally as many reasons why or why not a system would be best for each type of application.

One of the underlying principles behind my business case is that it can be modified, scaled back, accelerated or expanded depending on the needs of the business.

Phase Four: Review and modify, where necessary, the approach.

Phase Five: Roll out the project to other sites

### **Support of Other Organisations**

I have written to a number of associations and organisations seeking their input and support for my proposal.

To date I have received a letter of support from the Victoria Police Association and I am hopeful of receiving similar advice from the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Ambulance Victoria and the Rail Union.

### **Conclusion**

The prevalence of train suicides and the resultant impact on many sections of our community warrants every effort to reduce these numbers. At present, Victoria is by far the worst State for these types of incidents.

Completely eliminating this type of event is simply not a realistic goal, however, a relatively small reduction in the number of train deaths would have a significant impact on the lives of so many – including potential suicide victims, many of whom are young persons, who have made a terrible decision to end their own lives.

Those who join the emergency services do so in the knowledge that they are going to see some terrible things throughout their careers, but it is not until they are actually called to these scenes do they come to realise the lasting psychological impact for themselves and their families.

Train drivers on the other hand do not embark on this career with the same expectations and for so many Metro staff these events – particularly being the one who strikes a person – must be unimaginable.

There are unique challenges with preventing these types of incidents, but we can't let that stop us doing everything within our power to reduce their numbers.

Each incident represents a significant cost to Metro Trains, State and Federal Governments and the community as a whole and in a perfect world it would be ideal if some of this cost could be redirected to help prevent these events rather than dealing with the aftermath.

I believe that we need to completely rethink our strategy and approach to this issue, including the coordination between 'key' groups. Simply building another 20 kilometres of fencing, as is included in the current contract, is probably not the answer, as fencing on its own would seem to have had little impact on the number of deaths annually.

My concept centres around a staged, practical approach, aimed at demonstrating a 'proof of concept' and then rolling this out across the network. The aim will always be to reduce, not eliminate, the number of trained-assisted suicides. And by achieving a reduction of even 20-30 percent, this would result in not only a significant reduction in the amount of emotional suffering but would also represent a significant cost reduction at the same time. To simply continue with the current strategy will only ensure that on average 50 people, or more, will continue to take their lives by way of train assisted-suicide, and I think this unacceptable.