



Police Federation of Australia

The National Voice of Policing

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2021 Regional Telecommunications
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2021 REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

The Police Federation of Australia (PFA) is the national body representing the professional and industrial interests of Australia's more than 65,000 police officers, across all state, territory and the federal police jurisdictions.

	Membership as at 31/12/20
Police Association of South Australia	4,824
Western Australia Police Union of Workers	6,835
Queensland Police Union of Employees	11,970
The Police Association (Victoria)	17,685
Police Association of NSW	16,851
Police Association of Tasmania	1,375
Northern Territory Police Association	1,588
Australian Federal Police Association	4,115
Police Federation of Australia	65,243

It could be safely argued that there has not been an inquest or inquiry held in recent times where the issue of communications, within and between agencies, has not been raised as an issue of concern. This is particularly the case in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

Communications are a critical operational component for police and other emergency services. Loss of contact can be the difference between life and death in any incidents.

The ability to maintain contact between front line operations, supervisors and command centres is crucial in any operation. It ensures that –

- Front line officers' safety is paramount, and they know that help will be available if called upon;
- Operations remain appropriately coordinated; and
- Relevant information about an incident is able to be shared between the front line and the command centre thus ensuring that all potential risks are mitigated.

All previous reviews into major disasters and other critical incidents have shown the importance of communications in the overall effectiveness of the emergency services response, again, particularly in regional, rural and remote locations. All have highlighted similar issues including:

- Blackspots for voice and other telecommunications;
- Slow data speed;
- Outages;
- Damage to communication infrastructure;
- Lack of interoperability between agencies; and
- The inadequacy of spectrum allocations for the data communication needs of emergency services.

Much has also been written and spoken over a long period of time about blackspots and communications inefficiencies for residents in regional, rural and remote Australia, but such failures are magnified when emergency services are dealing with critical and potentially life-threatening incidents. What is even more concerning is many of these issues are also experienced in areas that are close to major capital centres and not at all considered to be in remote terrain.

Public Safety Mobile Broadband (PSMB) Capability

For many years, public safety agencies, including, police, fire and emergency services, have been calling for the introduction of a national PSMB capability (spectrum). For public safety agencies, effective communications are not just another business input, it is a critical input.

In fact, the *Radiocommunications Act 1992* recognises this when it says that adequate spectrum must be provided for defence, law enforcement and emergency services. Allocation and ongoing control of dedicated spectrum would give police and other emergency services the mission-critical standards they need, the access and priority they determine and the robustness, security and reliability that is essential to their responsibilities to the Australian public. Unfortunately, such access is still currently determined by private telcos.

For perfectly understandable commercial reasons, the telcos do not have the design, reliability, resilience, redundancy and security required for public safety purposes. Vital considerations including guaranteed access, freedom from congestion, reliability, security, sufficient capacity and real-time priority from commercial carriers' systems have not been demonstrated and are unlikely to be able to be assured. A commercial carrier losing just a few sites where a disaster is occurring, could have tragic consequences for police and emergency services members, as well as members of the public.

Since the beginning of the debate about PSMB, there have been numerous technological advances, including the development of further sophisticated equipment.

Police and other first responders are now commonly wearing body worn video devices and in car videos are common in many police vehicles. Smart watches are also being worn and this advance in technology provides the capacity to live stream data from crime and disaster scenes, directly to a command centre, not only for operational reasons, but importantly, officer safety.

Communities also have access to far more technology than before. In fact, in many cases, far better technology than that available to our first responders. Sensors in streets, cameras in public places, drones and other sensor technology are just some of the equipment being deployed in the public sphere. Whilst creating a flood of data this technology can also be essential in guarding public safety.

Many public and commercial buildings are now being outfitted with various sensors and control systems to improve their operation and protect the safety of their occupants.

Another significant advancement that needs to be embraced is 'next generation 000'.

Currently emergency communications centres receive voice calls and in some instances text messages to enable the dispatch of appropriate first responders to incidents. Advances in technology will soon see those centres have the capability to receive from the public and first responders, files, images and video clips and then to triage that information and send appropriate material direct to the scene of the incident.

All these advances are only available if we have sufficient telecommunications capability and the areas that are most likely to be without that capability are in regional, rural and remote Australia thus depriving them of the services available in our major centres.

The committee would be aware that recommendation 6.4 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements called for a nationally interoperable PSMB capability as a key priority for Australia's future crisis management efforts.

"Australian, state and territory governments should expedite the delivery of a Public Safety Mobile Broadband capability".¹

We understand that the Government's response is being led by the Department of Home Affairs and is expected to be consistent with the 2016 report by the Productivity Commission.² If that is the case, it will likely, in regional, rural and remote areas particularly, see a public safety mobile broadband capability operating on the top of the public carriers' networks. If that is to be the case, then issues such as 'roaming' needs to be a key consideration in such a system.

¹ Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. (2020), *Report*, p172, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/>

² Productivity Commission. (2015), *Public Safety Mobile Broadband, Research Report*, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/public-safety-mobile-broadband#report>

It is agreed that Public Safety does not have the capability to build an entire national public safety network on its own, therefore working with telcos to establish a roaming capability in many areas, poses the best alternate option. However, any system developed and agreed to by Public Safety needs to be telco agnostic and as such may require legislation to ensure an appropriate outcome and appropriate coverage, especially when it is the Commonwealth who issues licenses to the telcos, is leading the response to the Royal Commission recommendations and is funding 'black spot' programs to alleviate telecommunications shortcomings in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The PFA also made a submission to the Security Legislation Amendment (Critical Infrastructure) Bill 2020, which was conducted by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. In that submission we likewise pointed out the importance of a PSMB capability and its part in the nations' critical infrastructure, which should be recognised and underpinned by effective legislation.

It should be noted that the Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport and Cities, *Smart ICT Report on the inquiry into the role of smart ICT in the design and planning of infrastructure*, supported, "...recognising public safety communications as critical infrastructure."³

It seems somewhat ironic, that as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in the US, in Australia, we are still debating a PSMB capability. One of the most significant outcomes of the 9/11 Commission was the recommendation for and the creation of, FirstNet. The FirstNet Authority was established in light of 9/11, to create a single, nationwide broadband network specifically for first responders. The tragedies of 9/11 revealed fundamental problems with communication systems used in the US where land and mobile phone lines were overwhelmed by the high volume of calls and first responders struggled to communicate with each other. The same issues identified in the myriad of inquiries that have been held in Australia following every natural disaster and major incident.

The PFA believes that one of the key recommendations from this Inquiry should therefore be to strongly support Recommendation 6.4 of the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements and to call upon the Federal Government to urgently finalise the creation of a Public Safety Mobile Broadband capability for Australia's first responders.

³ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport and Cities. (2016), *Smart ICT Report on the inquiry into the role of smart ICT in the design and planning of infrastructure*, p IV, Canberra. Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/ITC/Smart_ICT/Report

Such an outcome would significantly enhance the safety of local communities and first responders, particularly in regional, rural and remote Australia.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Weber', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Scott Weber APM
Chief Executive Officer
29 September 2021