



18 February 2015

Letter to the editor – Response to The Saturday Paper 14/02/2015

Dear Editor,

The Salvation Army takes serious exception to the inaccurate and deceptive headline and opening paragraph in your story **'Nauru Salvos neglect PTSD staff'** written by Chris Shearer and published in The Saturday Paper on 14 February 2015. This article also contained many inaccurate and frankly offensive claims and was published with very little fact-checking.

I note the views and opinions of The Salvation Army to clarify the serious allegations were sought in a completely unprofessional and unethical manner.

It must be stressed, The Salvation Army paid for all counselling and medical support provided to staff. Employees were proactively approached and reminded they had free 24 hour access to an independent, on-island, medical health provider (PsyCare).

This service was available to all staff whilst they were on deployment and was extended to staff and their families upon their return to Australia.

Further, The Salvation Army had a range of initiatives in place to support staff on and off-island. These included extensive pre-employment screening and psychological testing, pre-deployment briefings, and further screenings and psychological follows up on-island and post-deployment. In addition, PsyCare provided a follow up service to all employees at the conclusion of our contract.

Regards,

Sharon Callister
CEO - Humanitarian Mission Services
The Salvation Army

Below are answers in response to questions put by The Saturday Paper in relation to Manus Island and Nauru Offshore Processing Centres. A number of these questions have previously been asked by other media organisations and our responses to these can be found on the Humanitarian Mission Services website at hms.salvos.org.au as well as below.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ASKED BY THE JOURNALIST

1. Approximately how many employees of The Salvation Army work in offshore detention facilities throughout the period that The Salvation Army operated at these facilities?

Several hundred, the exact number is hard to quantify given the short period provided for a response.

However, approximately 350 staff worked for The Salvation Army when the end of the contract with Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) was announced.

2. Were the confidentiality agreements included in employee contracts a standard part of The Salvation Army employment contracts or where they included at the bequest of DIAC (later DIBP)?

The Salvation Army did not issue any confidentiality agreements.

The Confidentiality Deeds were signed between the Commonwealth of Australia and the individual employee only. The Salvation Army was not a party to these Deeds.

We have previously responded to these allegations (e.g. The Salvation Army was not silent).

3. Is The Salvation Army aware of sexual harassment claims made by employees against other service providers' personnel?

Any claims made of that nature were thoroughly investigated by our on-island HR management team and in accordance with internal Salvation Army processes.

Further, we made a statement to a Senate Inquiry about staff claims and other information related to Manus Island and Nauru as below:

- The Salvation Army Opening Statement (Senate Inquiry into the Incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre); and
- Submissions (Senate Inquiry into the Incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre).

4. Why was The Salvation Army's contract to provide humanitarian support not renewed by the DIBP?

That is a matter for DIBP.

5. Is The Salvation Army aware that some employees claim not have had follow up calls from PsyCare after their contracts ended?

Could you please provide more detail about this as without specific information, we are not in a position to adequately respond to your question. Also, questions like this, referencing a third party provider, would need the advice of that organisation.

However, at the conclusion of our contract with DIBP, all employees received written advice confirming they have access to Salvation Army employee assistance (EAP) provided by an external provider – PsyCare.

All additional correspondence to employees included instructions referring them to EAP.

The Salvation Army paid for all counselling and support provided to staff. This occurred at the commencement of our involvement in offshore processing.

The Salvation Army had a range of initiatives in place to support staff on and off island. These included extensive pre-employment screening and psychological testing, pre-deployment briefings, and further screenings and psychological follows up on-island and post-deployment. In addition, PsyCare provided a follow up service to all employees at the conclusion of our contract.

6. Is The Salvation Army paying for or has it paid for counselling for former employees who worked in offshore detention centres? How many? When did this begin? Is it ongoing?

Yes. The Salvation Army paid for all counselling and support provided to staff. This was in place at the commencement of our involvement in offshore processing.

The Salvation Army had a range of initiatives in place to support staff. These included extensive pre-employment screening and psychological testing, pre-deployment briefings, and further screenings and psychological follows up on-island and post-deployment.

More specifically:

- Whilst on-island (in Manus Island and Nauru), staff had access to a comprehensive Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provided by an external clinical psychology firm. This was a unique initiative set up at the discretion of The Salvation Army at the commencement of our involvement in offshore processing. These psychologists were available solely to staff and would help them address any issues they raised;
- The on-island support was provided by external clinical psychologists and the programme included:- Complete on-island orientation of arriving personnel; weekly EAP check-in for each person with reference to the wellbeing plans; 4-6 toolbox talks available to personnel per week; individual support and supervision as required; critical incident management and behaviour support; E-check in kiosk monitoring and follow-up; and group reintegration briefing on-island immediately prior to finishing rotations;
- Staff and their families were entitled to receive a number of psychological support sessions post-deployment. They could also receive more support and help if requested;
- Staff also had access to dedicated help lines – Salvos Counselling and Salvos Care Line;
- The Salvation Army ran workshops that dealt with how to manage things like vicarious trauma, managing stress, understanding different cultures; and
- In addition, The Salvation Army had other support and briefings for staff

7. Could staff take up a posting without signing the federal government's confidentiality clause?

The Commonwealth required all employees to sign a confidentiality agreement.

8. Did PsyCare make proactive phone calls or book sessions with all returning staff, to assess their mental health, or were staff simply informed in writing of this service?

All questions about PsyCare need to be directed to that organisation.

The Salvation Army contacted all staff through a variety of channels – both on-island and domestically. This assistance was available to staff and their families.

9. Why were staff seeking external mental health care on return, which the Salvation Army eventually paid for, and does this not show the staff were neglected or at least not properly informed of your systems?

Could you please provide further details so this allegation could be looked into? Without further detail on individual cases, it is difficult to comment.

However, all staff were informed, through a number of channels of the assistance available to them and their families. This assistance was available during and after their employment.

The fact of staff seeking ongoing assistance is not of itself any sign of failure of either the individuals or the organisation. It needs to be remembered that this can be a high pressure and deeply emotional environment, where staff engage with persons in very stressful situations. The support of mental health professionals during and following being at work, is consistent with a supported environment so that individuals engaging in this work are looking after themselves.

10. Is The Salvation Army confident it has dealt with and followed up on the mental health of all employees who work on Manus or Nauru?

Again, as per previous discussions, we had an external, independent, mental health provider available at all times, 24/7, both on-island and after staff returned from their postings.

Staff have been informed of their options and are encouraged to contact The Salvation Army if they have any concerns.

11. How could staff receive "extensive pre-employment screening and psychological testing, pre-deployment briefings" if they were deployed sometimes two or three days after being employed?

As the requirements of our involvement changed, so too did the employment process we used.

The important thing to note is, staff had 24/7 access to medical assistance and this assistance was extended to their families and after their employment had ceased. This service was available virtually at the commencement of our involvement in offshore processing.

12. Could you respond to the account in the piece that staff were scared of the stigma of using mental health support while on deployment, and that they felt unsupported by senior staff?

Mental health support was conducted and run by an external, third-party provider and not by The Salvation Army.

Senior staff we have spoken to about this allegation absolutely reject the allegations made and vehemently oppose any suggestion staff were stigmatised and / or left unsupported.

Further, they are offended by the suggestion they would ignore any staff member.

13. Could you respond to the account that the Salvation Army indicated they would not renew contracts with people whose mental health was affected by time offshore?

The Salvation Army would never discriminate against someone on the basis of mental health.

So that we can properly understand the allegation, could you please provide further details to allow this to be thoroughly investigated? Without further detail on individual cases, it is difficult to comment.

As mental health is a complex subject, there is no single, all-encompassing response to individual cases and claims.