True Crime Australia | Police & Courts

Extent of violence against emergency workers revealed; Unions demand stronger penalties to punish offenders

A medical worker was spitting and kicked on duty at Modbury Hospital, and NT police are expressing their sick punishing for permanently stronger penalties, even after the pandemic.

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- No bail for allegedly assaulted frontline workers
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Paramedics threatened with a gun and police officers restraining broken bones are among hundreds of frontline emergency service workers assaulted each year in South Australia.

Almost 1700 have been assaulted in the last five years while trying to save lives and protect the public.

Unions that represent frontline workers say more must be done to stop and punish the "cowardly acts".

Attorney-General Vickie Chapman this week will seek to bail assaulted, refused on offenders who assault frontline workers, except in rare circumstances.

But she is facing pressure from the SA Labor Opposition to go further by making the changes permanent, rather than just the coronavirus period.

The Opposition also wants stronger penalties for people who claim to have COVID-19 and assault frontline workers.

Ms Chapman said all protections implemented during the pandemic would be reviewed once it passed and some could be retained.

"The intervention is based on keeping South Australian safe during the pandemic," she told The Advertiser. "Of all of measures, including other changes already law, are temporary in nature," she said.

How the COVIDSafe app works

Step 1: Check the app, set up the phone to show it on phones with the app installed are within 1.5m of you.

When two phones detect each other through a message an anonymous ID. A another phone is in proximity it's recorded. If a person later tests positive for COVID-19 health officials if you were contracted COVID-19.

If you are diagnosed with COVID-19 a health official will ask you to share your data. This will let people of your contacts. You will be sent a text message with a pin number to consent to share.

This data is sent to a national store and then decrypted by the relevant state officials. Only the data of any infected. The data at any time.

Health officials then phone the contacts to tell them they may have been exposed to the coronavirus.

All data on the phone is deleted after 21 days. If a contact deletes the app it also deletes the data.

The data sent to the national store is deleted at the end of the pandemic, which will be removed in six months time.

The data on the phone is encrypted and cannot be seen by the owner or any other person. It is illegal for any law enforcement or government agency or court to attempt to access the data.

Get the app

Authorities have condemned assaults on emergency services workers as unacceptable and deplorable, saying they can affect the ability of crews to do their job and have lasting psychological trauma on victims.

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Latest police figures show 49 people have been arrested and charged with assaults on frontline emergency service workers was introduced in December last year.

It ensures prison sentences of up to 25 years for anyone who causes harm to, or assaults, a police officer, paramedic, firefighter or other emergency service workers in the line of duty.

A Whyalla Street man, 35, was charged last Monday, after police allege he turned to an officer, stated he had "corona" and coughed in his face.

SA Police Association president Mark Carroll said he had complained about the "cowardly and repulsive act before against other police officers," Mr Carroll said.

"Police officers, emergency services workers and frontline health workers deserve these amendments permanently, not just now," Mr Carroll said.

Mark Carroll, president of the Police Association of South Australia, with Liberal MP Vincent Tarzia, MP Dennis Hildyard, Mr Carroll's predecessor Ian Leach and Mark Lamb. Picture: AAP / Mathew Sleeman

"In recent years, we've seen a general decline in respect for law enforcement, emergency services and frontline health workers.

"There should never be any tolerance for those who seek to harm these workers, whether it is during a pandemic or not."

Mr Carroll said two officers each sustained a broken ankle during violent attacks in unrelated incidents in February.

"Both were making arrests during separate domestic disturbances. Both were kicked in the face and another assaulted another police officer," Mr Carroll said.

SA Police has arrested almost 5000 people for assaulting emergency services workers between 2014 and February 28 this year.

Mark Lamb, president of the Ambulance Employees Association

Police are still collating data on such assaults since the start of the coronavirus crisis.

"Any assault against police officers is unacceptable and will not be tolerated," an SA Police spokesman said.

"The very nature of police work means frontline police officers face dangers daily from incidents they attend and encounters they may have.

"An assault may include intentionally coming human biological material to come into contact with a victim or threatening to do so."

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Police Minister Corey Wingard said emergency services workload hard to protect the community and deserved the same treatment.

"It's deplorable to think that our frontline emergency workers are subjected to such cowardly behaviour, simply doing their job," Mr Wingard said. "Let up to the courts to hand down those tougher punishments and I encourage them to do so."

SA Ambulance Service figures show officer assaults dropped between 2011 and 2017, when 119 were recorded, but spiked to 175 in 2018 and increased again to 185 last year.

Assaults included deliberate bites, kicks and punches, deliberate exposure to blood and bodily fluids, threatened assault and verbal aggression.

In one incident, two paramedics were chased and threatened with a gun by the relative of a patient. In another, a group of men demanded a $20 a paramedic working on a patient.

PARAMEDICS IN DANGER

Mr Lenny and all offenders - whether affected by drugs, alcohol or mental illness - must be held accountable for their actions and treated as criminals, he said. Picture: AAP / Mathew Sleeman

SA Ambulance Service chief executive David Place said it was committed to preventing violence against officers through its Keep Your Hands Off Our Badges campaign.

"Violence and aggression can affect the ability of our staff to do their jobs and often have a lasting impact," he said.

Health Minister Stephen Wade said: "Our emergency service workers are the backbone of our society and it's absolutely vital our lives protect frontline emergency workers.

Opposition Leader Peter Malinauskas said he supported increased penalties for people assaulting SA Police and frontline workers, including the Chapman's move to flip the presumption of bail.

"We can strongly believe there is a need to go harder and do more," he said.

Labor has drafted proposed laws that would impose penalties of up to 10 years in jail for anyone who has or claims to be infected with coronavirus and assaults a frontline worker.

Australian Nursing and Midwifery SA chief executive Adrian Pecora said nurses and midwives "are no strangers to exploring the possibility of a permanent change to bail regulations. "Nurses, midwives, care workers ... should not be looking over their shoulder wondering if they might be assaulted or abused on that day," Prof Pecora said.

"We firmly believe a zero tolerance approach is the right way to proceed."

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