

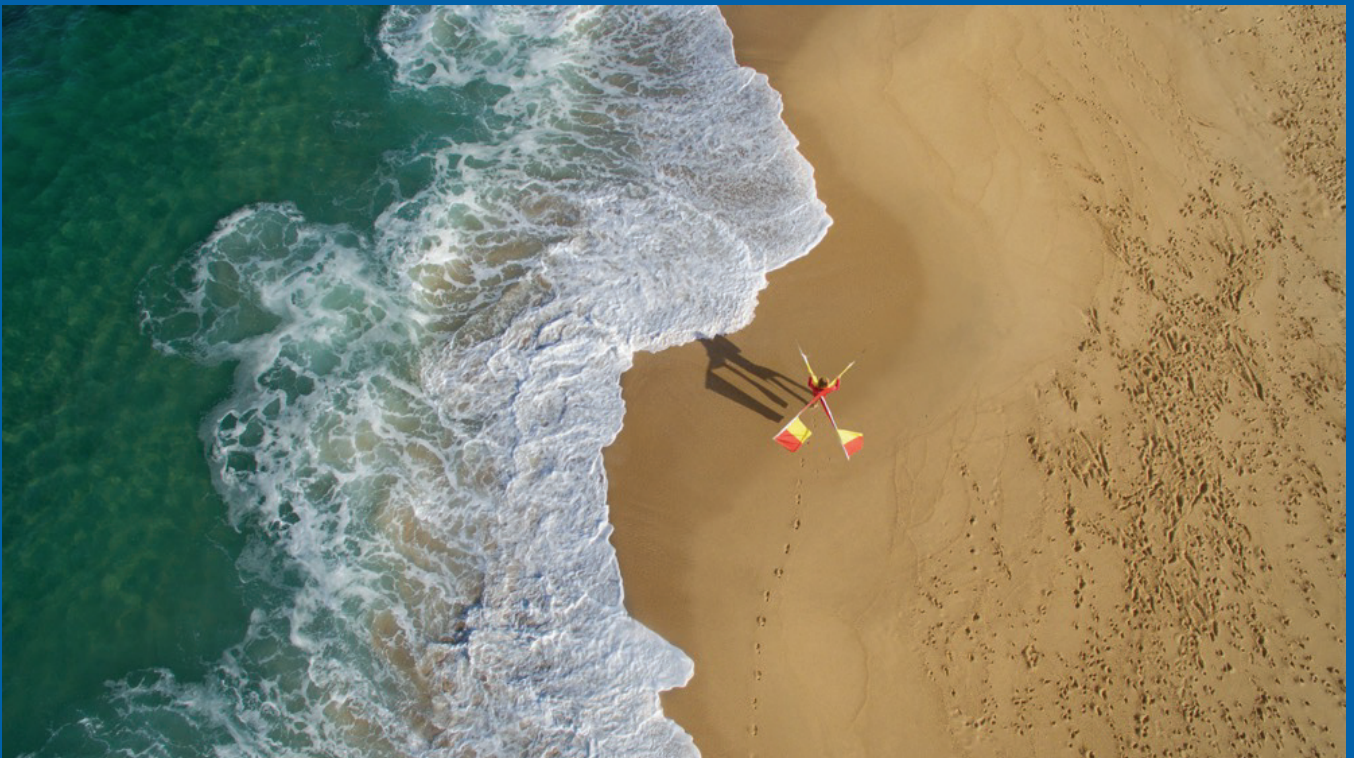


NEW SOUTH
WALES

SLSNSW

Peer Support and Critical Incident Management

Overview and Procedures



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Introduction

Surf Life Saving New South Wales (SLSNSW) is the peak coastal water safety, drowning prevention and rescue authority in New South Wales. Each year, SLSNSW's 20,000 patrolling members volunteer well over half a million hours on patrol across our 129 affiliated Surf Life Saving clubs, across 11 branches.

The SLSNSW Strategic Plan aims to build our Wellbeing system to be one of the best in the sector. It commits to education, awareness and providing the skills and support required to achieve organisational goals. SLSNSW manage many hundreds of incidents each year at beaches across the state. Given the exposure of volunteer members and employees to these incidents, SLSNSW has implemented a Critical Incident Framework to support members and employees with care and appropriate interventions, where required. It is also acknowledged that members and employees may experience personal challenges outside of their SLSNSW role and may benefit from support to fulfill their duties.

The Peer Support Program aims to enhance and expand upon the Critical Incident support and SLSNSW's commitment to member and employee wellbeing. Peer support will play a key role in supporting members and employees following critical incidents and/or as a result of issues in their day-to-day lives. The Peer Support program operates in conjunction with other support options including the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team and Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

In 2019 SLSNSW implemented the State Welfare Officer Program to provide post Critical Incident support to members alongside Duty Officers and the SLSNSW Membership team. In the 2022/23 season Mental Health and Wellbeing Champions were also trained to provide general mental health support and promote awareness of mental health initiatives. Following a review to ensure sector best practice in the wellbeing space, these roles have been aligned to other emergency services and SLSNSW will be implementing the Peer Support Program at the start of the 2024/25 season.

The new roles of Peer Support Officer and Branch Peer Support Officer will assume most of the duties previously provided by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Champions and State Welfare Officers, providing a tiered level of peer support for member and staff wellbeing and Critical Incident management. SLSNSW will aim to uplift the mental health literacy across the organisation through targeted training initiatives available to all members and staff.

This document is intended to support the Wellbeing Team with a standard approach towards the recruitment, selection, training and ongoing professional development of suitable members and staff to deliver the Peer Support Program. Furthermore, the framework will underpin the continued growth and sustainability of the Peer Support Program.

Purpose

The Peer Support program is not intended to provide a counselling service or formal mental health service. It is a volunteer member/staff contact, support and referral program, founded upon the principles of Psychological First Aid (PFA). The evidence base for a peer support program is grounded in research demonstrating the positive impact of conversations with a skilled peer on mental health outcomes, improved wellbeing and recovery. This is particularly well recognised amongst emergency service workers and first responders, who often feel more comfortable talking with a colleague who is familiar with the challenges of their role and is trained in having empathic, non-judgmental conversations.

Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a best practice response to individuals experiencing distress, focusing on providing practical assistance, comfort, and information to promote their emotional wellbeing and resilience. PFA offers compassionate, supportive, and practical aid to individuals who have recently experienced a critical incident or 'potentially traumatic event' (PTE).

While crucial for restoring a sense of safety and order, not everyone affected by an incident requires PFA. It is important to clarify that PFA is distinct from debriefing, counselling, mental health first aid, and does not involve diagnosis or treatment. Derived from extensive research, PFA comprises five key elements: promoting safety, calmness, connectedness, self and community efficacy, and hope.

The methodology that fundamentally underlies the support provided by the Peer Support Program is the promotion and application of PFA.

Peer Support Program Roles and Responsibilities

Peer Support Officers (PSO)

The role of the Peer Support Officer (PSO) is to provide a proactive and preventative approach to support the mental wellbeing of members within their club or work area, promote social connection and support across membership/staff groups. The PSO's role is to provide skilled peer support to individuals who may be experiencing challenges, encourage and facilitate early help-seeking behaviours. This is a non-clinical role that does not require any specialist psychological or clinical knowledge and appropriate training will be provided. PSO's are not expected to provide support outside their regular Club involvement/work hours.

Branch Peer Support Officers (BPSO),

The Branch Peer Support Officer (BPSO) role is to attend critical incidents across the Branch and provide support to the Duty Officer with scene management and operational debriefs. The BPSO will apply the SLSNSW Critical Incident Support Framework, provide individual well checks post-incident, and refer individuals on to professional support services as required. The BPSO will liaise with the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team to ensure members and staff are appropriately supported and Critical Incident Support Framework is followed. This is a non-clinical role, with additional experience and training to provide an advanced level of peer support, particularly focused on Critical Incident Support.

SLSNSW Wellbeing Team

The SLSNSW Wellbeing Team will be responsible for the ongoing coordination of the Peer Support Program, including recruitment, training and maintenance of support resources. They will liaise with BPSOs to ensure the SLSNSW Critical Incident Support Framework is followed, coordinate ongoing support of each case and liaise with BPSOs (where appointed) to ensure all parties have been contacted, support arrangements agreed, and records have been kept. The SLSNSW Wellbeing Team will provide well checks to individuals where the BPSO does not have capacity to complete these. They will also coordinate wellbeing training and information sessions to increase and promote mental health literacy across SLSNSW.

Position descriptions for the Peer Support Officer and Branch Peer Support Officer are located on the SLSNSW website.

Peer Support Operating Model

The SLSNSW Wellbeing Team will coordinate the Peer Support Program from an operational perspective. They will manage the program governance, recruitment and selection process, training and ongoing professional development of Peer Support Officers and Branch Peer Support Officers. The number of volunteers involved in the Peer Support Program will be determined in collaboration with Clubs, Branches and SLSNSW.

Rostering and Activation of Branch Peer Support Officers

Whilst it is acknowledged there is significant variation in the number and types of critical incidents, geographical size and membership of various Branches, the intention over time is to build the BPSO team to ensure sufficient coverage, utilisation and capacity to balance the role with other Surf Life Saving and external commitments, injury or illness.

Rostering

It is suggested that each branch have 2 BPSOs rostered on each weekend to be available to attend onsite. Rostering will be coordinated by the Branch. It is recommended that the rosters are coordinated by a Branch Administrator or key members such as the Director of Life Saving or Branch Welfare Officer. These rosters are to be shared with SOC by midday Friday, in line with the Branch Duty Officer rosters. The SOC must also be advised if there are no BPSOs rostered.

Activation

Branch Duty Officers will contact the rostered BPSO/s to attend incidents onsite, where possible, in accordance with the SLSNSW Critical Incident Support Framework (see section below) and Incident matrix, at their discretion. Branches may collaborate with neighbouring Branches to contact and engage their respective BPSOs for support if needed, especially where logistically appropriate.

Escalation

The Branch Duty Officer may escalate to the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team where required, such as where there are insufficient numbers of BPSOs available with respect to the incident. The SLSNSW Wellbeing Team will then endeavour to enlist a neighbouring BPSO or utilise the State Emergency Service Peer Support Officers via the existing Memorandum of Understanding.

Critical Incident Response Framework

In line with Australian best practice guidelines regarding critical incident support and management, SLSNSW utilise a framework whereby any member or staff member exposed to a potentially traumatic event (PTE), is contacted and assessed for any reactions that may indicate the need for referral to specialist support.

SLSNSW recognise that following a critical incident, many people may experience some reactions and possible changes to their physical state, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. However, in most instances, these reactions are short lived and subside relatively quickly, within a few days or weeks. Most people make a full recovery and do not go on to experience clinical disorders such as Depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), requiring specialist treatment.

However, a small percentage of the population may be more vulnerable to experiencing strong trauma reactions post-incident. This may be due to a number of reasons including prior experiences of trauma, thinking style, personality traits, limited support, or current major stress.

SLSNSW aim to identify this small proportion of our members and staff that may not cope effectively post-incident and ensure that they are linked to the appropriate professional services to assist them to make a full recovery.

Critical Incident Support Process

SLSNSW have adopted a best practice approach to supporting our members and staff following a critical incident. For some people, critical incidents may be potentially traumatic events, and it is hard to predict how people may respond or be affected, and the level of support they may require.

Accordingly, SLSNSW have implemented a support process whereby all members and staff that are directly involved in a critical incident as part of their Surf Life Saving duties, or who are present and witness a critical incident, will be connected with support post-incident. As part of this process, they will be provided with a range of options and resources to ensure their ongoing wellbeing and health.

Members and staff will receive follow up support within certain timeframes to review their coping and recovery and ensure that any strong responses or reactions post-event can be effectively assessed and managed by the appropriate person.

Critical Incident Support Model

Branch Peer Support Officers and the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team will be responsible for managing the wellbeing component of critical incidents by way of onsite support, group briefing sessions and the provision of well checks with members and staff.

Onsite – same day



Post Incident



Operational debriefing is a routine and formal response to a critical incident, conducted by the Duty Officer. This process is generally acknowledged as appropriate practice and is nearly always helpful when conducted skilfully, however, attendance should always be considered voluntary with individual wellbeing a priority. Please refer to page 257 of the [Public Safety Standard Operating Procedures](#) 35th edition for further information on Operational Debriefing.

Group Briefing Session – Delivery and Timeframes:

A group briefing is recommended post-incident to bring people together and outline their support options and next steps. This would be conducted by the Branch Peer Support Officer and would take place as part of the critical incident support steps coordinated by the Duty Officer following an event. This is a separate process to an Operational Debrief which would focus more on process, errors, new learning and recommended changes to SOPs.

The group session occurring post-incident should be very clear on the objectives and process. It is important to do the following:

- Acknowledge the incident;
- Recognise that some people may be affected, both physically and mentally;
- Confirm the SLSNSW critical incident support process;
- Advise individual support is available and people will be contacted for a well check (noting that it may be the Branch Peer Support Officer or the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team);
- Provide any positive feedback on what was done well; and
- Highlight resources available to members such as EAP, written material, website, apps.

Importantly, this session is not Psychological or stress debriefing, which has little supportive empirical evidence and can be harmful in some situations. Accordingly, the group session should not:

- Move toward becoming a group counselling or therapy session;
- Encourage people to ventilate or air their experiences or emotions;
- Probe further into what people saw, heard or felt;
- Suggest or imply that people may become unwell or suffer long-term effects;
- Minimise the incident or potential impact on some people;
- Delve into the details of the operational component and individual actions or decisions made, when people may still be in shock or potentially traumatised; and
- Imply blame, identify errors, reprimand people. Review of failures in response can occur at a separate distinct operational review, once some of the initial reaction and emotion have subsided.

Where there have been members or staff under the age of 18 involved in group briefing sessions, the team leader (patrol captain, lifeguard or UAV Team Leader) should also inform the parent of a young person's involvement.

Well check - Delivery and Timeframes:

Following the group briefing, a well check is conducted with all members or staff either directly or indirectly involved in the critical incident. Well checks are conducted on a one-to-one basis and consists of:

- Assessment of how the person is presenting and appears to be coping;
- N.B. Do not actively prompt or encourage the person to talk about what they saw, heard or experienced. This is not necessarily helpful and can cause harm;
- Review of the person's support network. Confirm that there is someone available to provide support;
- Overview of coping mechanisms. How does the person usually cope and manage stress?;
- Tips for adrenalin reduction. Provide education on reducing the shock response through:
 - ✓ Exercise to burn off the adrenalin
 - ✓ Controlled breathing to aid relaxation
 - ✓ Distraction to help settle the thoughts
- Options to get home. Consider safety and capacity to drive if visibly shaken and distressed;
- Overview of the support available from SLSNSW:
 - ✓ Sessions with a psychologist through EAP (phone, face to face or video)
 - ✓ Written information and psychoeducation from SLSNSW
 - ✓ Resources available online through EAP
 - ✓ Regular follow-up over the first month post-incident
 - ✓ Internal support through the Club and Patrol Captains and Peer Support Officers
- Next steps and expectations around further review and follow-up.

After an incident, each person will be contacted three times in the month following to identify any changing support needs. Well check 1 occurs within 48 hours, with face-to-face support or a call by the Branch Peer Support Officer. If this is not possible, a call will be made by the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team.

Well check 2 occurs approximately one-week post-incident and Well check 3 occurs approximately one-month post-incident, ensuring a complete return to pre-incident function. The purpose of the Well checks is to provide Peer Support, information regarding common reactions to critical incidents, screen for any indications of distress, trauma or other concerning reactions eg: interrupted sleep, intrusive thoughts, anxiety or hyperarousal and provide information on available supports. Members who experience these symptoms are encouraged to engage with professional support services such as the MAP/EAP.

Suggested scripts for the Well checks are provided to BPSOs and included in the Branch Peer Support Officer Guide. These are some suggestions that may aid the person providing the Well check and psychological first aid. They are suggestions only and it is important to find your own approach and style that feels natural and authentic, empathetic and focused on the person.

Referring for Professional Support

During a Peer Support conversation or during a well check, if the person you are supporting displays distress, emotional turmoil, difficulty engaging or appears not to be coping and adjusting, recommend/facilitate an appointment with the SLSNSW EAP provider. The EAP offers 24/7 support with counsellors who are trained in general mental health and Critical Incident Management. Emphasise the option to contact them anytime, including day, night, weekends, and public holidays, for immediate assistance.

The [National Emergency Worker Support Scheme](#) is also a recommended resource which offers free and confidential mental health support for emergency service workers and volunteers.

Alternatively, members and staff may consult their GP for a Medicare referral to see a private psychologist. Direct booking with a psychologist is also an option, with the ability to claim expenses through private health insurance.

When addressing issues such as mental health, substance abuse, past traumatic experiences, or major life stressors, prompt recognition and referral are crucial.

Confidentiality and Privacy

To ensure trust and confidence in the Peer Support Program, Peer Support should be provided with strict confidentiality and privacy. The PSO/BPSO training program will provide a detailed overview of the parameters of confidentiality and limits. Any conversations with a member/staff member should be treated as confidential unless there are concerns for the safety of the individual or others, or where the individual gives permission for the PSO/BPSO to share relevant information to a third party.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is the granting of permission by an individual based on having full knowledge of the possible consequences. Members/staff should be given the right to informed consent before participating in the Well Check process or a Peer Support conversation.

Escalation Process/Breaching Confidentiality

As a Peer Support Officer or Branch Peer Support Officer, there may be circumstances where you have concerns regarding the safety of the individual you are supporting or their capacity to undertake their role, which may include public safety considerations. These circumstances may require a breach of confidentiality, whilst balancing their privacy. The escalation process is to speak directly to the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team who will assist you with managing the individual's wellbeing and any mandatory or appropriate notifications with the support of external and professional advice and support. If there is immediate risk, please contact 000.

Fitness for Duties and Stand Down Procedure

Returning to or maintaining normal duties is usually a positive element in recovering following a critical incident or managing mental health concerns. If you have any concern around a member or staff's ability to perform their duties or their potential to cause harm to themselves or others either by action or inaction, then raise your concern in confidence with the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team or your supervisor (eg Club Captain or Manager) who in turn can engage with the Wellbeing Team.

The Wellbeing Team may be consulted, and concerns may be discussed without identifying the member or staff in question. At all stages, the wellbeing of the individual and the rights and need for confidentiality will be weighed with the potential risk to other members, employees and/or the public. The Wellbeing Team will engage with skilled professional support to manage each individual concern. If found to be sufficient, an executive representative from the Club or SLSNSW will be approached (Preferably the President, Membership Manager or CEO) to discuss concerns with the member or staff and determine the best course of action. This may include a review of their volunteer engagement at various levels eg Club Patrol Captain, Club call out team member, Branch RWC Operator, a review of their current support network, and their fitness for duties and impact of participation on themselves and others.

Each concern will be managed by the Wellbeing Team in conjunction with an external and skilled professional, and a course of action will be undertaken with the member or employee, as participation in the process can be a very beneficial step.

Members and Staff may be directed to seek medical clearance or completion of a "Fitness for Duties" form before returning to normal duties in line with their employment contract or Surf Life Saving Australia Member Support Guideline.

Branch Peer Support Officers do not have the authority to stand anyone one down. This decision may only be made in consultation with skilled professionals to ensure that Member Wellbeing remains as a priority and will form part of the individual's fitness for duties review.

Reporting, Record Keeping and Privacy

To ensure privacy and security of personal and/or sensitive information, PSOs are not expected to keep any file notes or records of contact with members/staff.

BPSOs are required to keep a record of contact/attempts for well checks and liaise with the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team, in accordance with the [Critical Incident Response Framework](#). Records do not need to be detailed and should not be extensive clinical records with a lot of personal information. They should be very brief, and it is recommended that a few basic notes be kept with the following information:

- Date of contact;
- One sentence on what was discussed or recommended; and
- Any agreed next steps eg: the next follow up date or referral to a professional or another service.

Consideration needs to be given towards the security of this information as it is personal and private. Accordingly, these records should only be maintained in the Wellbeing Team's database. Caution should be taken regarding

the information that is shared via email being limited to contacts made/not made.

Conflicts of Interest

In some instances, it may not be appropriate for a certain person to complete the Well check with the member/staff. Examples of this include:

- When the parties are family members;
- When the parties are in a romantic relationship with each other;
- When the parties are close friends;
- If there is a history of conflict or interpersonal difficulty.

In these instances, the member or staff should be linked in with an alternate person or the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team for the well check. Where this is not practicable, they may consider completing the initial well check and then handing over future well checks to the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team.

Working with Children and Young People

Surf Life Saving (SLS) is committed to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all Children and Young People (CYP) who are involved in SLS. Please refer to the [Child Safe Guidelines](#) for further information on working with Children and Young People.

Informed Consent, Confidentiality and Parental Involvement for Children and Young People

It is SLSNSW standard policy to seek parental consent prior to engaging in a well check conversation with a young person. In many instances it may be appropriate to conduct the well check with the parent of the young person. Young people should also be assessed for their capacity to give informed consent. Young people, like adults, should be afforded the right to confidentiality. An important aspect of informed consent is ensuring individuals are aware of limits of confidentiality. In general, safety always overrides confidentiality. If it is believed there is a risk of harm to anyone based on information provided by a young person, this information can be disclosed to the relevant parties. These matters will be covered in more detail during the PSO and BPSO training.

Recruitment and Training of Peer Supporters

Recruitment process – Peer Support Officers

Step 1: Promotion

Expressions of interest will be sought around June each year, communicated via the Wellbeing Team to branches and clubs.

Step 2: Expression of Interest

All Expressions of Interest (EOI) to be submitted online. The Expression of Interest will ask Members/staff to:

- Explain why they would like to be a Peer Support Officer;
- Share a short overview of their experience within Surf Life Saving, focusing primarily on their current role for staff or lifesaving for members (e.g. patrolling, emergency call out, support operations) and member/staff engagement/Wellbeing experience;
- Describe any relevant experience, skills, or qualifications they have that would make them suitable to be a Peer Support Officer; and
- Complete the self-reflection checklist and confirm their ability to commit to key functions of the PSO role.

Step 3: Shortlisting

Candidates will be shortlisted by the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team based on the number of volunteer positions required and relevance of responses on the EOI to Essential and Desired Skills/Knowledge for the PSO position.

Step 4: Club President/SLSNSW Manager (for SLSNSW Employees) Endorsement

The Wellbeing Team will then consult with Club Presidents/SLSNSW Manager providing them with an opportunity to provide feedback regarding suitability and capacity. Candidates will then be notified of the outcome of their application.

Step 5: Training

Successful candidates will be invited to attend Peer Support Officer Training. This may be in-person or virtual delivery. The focus of the training will be understanding the Role Responsibilities of Peer Support Officers and principles of Psychological First Aid. Refresher training and other relevant training may also be provided. Peer Support Officers will also be required to complete the SLSA Child Safe Awareness online course within 1 month of their appointment. This can be accessed through Members Area e-Learning.

Step 6: Appointment

Once the Peer Support Officer Training has been completed, successful applicants will be officially appointed to the Peer Support Officer roles for a two-year term. It may be appropriate for new Peer Support Officers to be paired with more experienced Peer Support Officers within the club, branch or SLSNSW. Peer Support Officers may also seek guidance/support from the Wellbeing Team and/or the EAP. Once the initial two-year term expires, PSOs will be invited to opt in/out for future years.

Recruitment Process – Branch Peer Support Officers

Step 1: Promotion

Expressions of interest will be sought from time to time, as roles are available, from suitably qualified candidates.

Step 2: Expression of Interest

All expressions of interest to be submitted online. The Expression of Interest will ask members to:

- Explain why they would like to be a Branch Peer Support Officer;
- Share a short overview of their experience within Surf Life Saving, focusing primarily on their lifesaving (e.g. patrolling, emergency call out, support operations) and member engagement/wellbeing experience;
- Describe any relevant experience, skills, or qualifications they have that would make them suitable to be a BPSO;
- Describe their previous BPSO/PSO experience and list any relevant mental health (or related discipline) qualifications or experience;
- Confirm their ability to commit to key functions of the BPSO role, including their ability to attend critical incidents as required; and
- Describe their other commitments within Surf Lifesaving.

Step 3: Shortlisting

Candidates will be shortlisted by the Wellbeing Team based on the number of volunteer positions required and relevance of responses on the EOI to Essential and Desired Skills/Knowledge for the BPSO position.

Step 4: Interview

Shortlisted candidates will be invited to attend an in-person or virtual interview. The State Director of Life Saving will appoint suitable interviewer/s that may include a SLSNSW Wellbeing Team representative, another appropriate SLSNSW representative or an external consultancy. The interview process will aim to determine the candidate's understanding of the role, relevant capabilities and suitability to participate in the Peer Support Program. It is acknowledged that training will be provided so candidates are not expected to have all the skills and knowledge outlined in the position descriptions.

Step 5: Endorsement

The Wellbeing Team will then consult with the Member's Branch President, providing them with an opportunity to provide feedback regarding suitability and capacity. Candidates will then be notified of the outcome of their application and interview.

Step 6: Training

Successful candidates will be invited to attend Branch Peer Support Officer Training. This may be in-person or Virtual delivery. The focus of the training will be understanding the SLSNSW Critical Incident Management Model, the Role Responsibilities of local and Branch Peer Support Officers, understanding the trauma response, identifying signs and symptoms of psychological distress, principles of Psychological First Aid. Refresher training and other relevant training may also be provided. Branch Peer Support Officers will also be required to complete the SLSA Child Safe Awareness online course within 1 month of their appointment. This can be accessed through Members Area e-Learning.

Step 7: Appointment

Once the Branch Peer Support Officer Training has been completed, successful applications will be officially appointed to the Branch Peer Support Officer roles. Branch Peer Support Officers may also seek guidance/support from the SLSNSW Wellbeing Team and/or the EAP. Once the initial two-year term expires, BPSOs will be invited to opt in/out.

Step 8: Rostering

Whilst there may be some variation between branches, once BPSOs are appointed, they are expected to participate in an on-call roster. The total number of BPSOs in each Branch will vary dependant on needs, with 2 BPSOs rostered together each weekend. BPSOs would need to advise a Branch Administrator of any unavailability to ensure sufficient coverage. BPSOs should not be acting in an operational capacity when they are on the BPSO on-call roster. Under extenuating circumstances, BPSOs may also be requested to attend onsite at neighbouring Branch locations and/or provide remote support for other Branches across the state.

Ongoing Professional Development

PSOs and BPSOs may be requested to attend ongoing leaning and development opportunities to ensure a continuing high standard of support provided to members. Ongoing professional development may include:

- Updates to Peer Support Program and/or Critical Incident model
- Refresher training in Psychological First Aid
- Suicide awareness and prevention
- Understanding Vicarious Trauma
- Participation in Well checks

Any additional training will be coordinated by the Wellbeing Team and may be delivered face to face or virtually.

Termination

The term of a PSO and BPSO will expire every two years, at which point the member/staff can re-apply and complete re-accreditation training. The SLSNSW Wellbeing team, in consultation with Clubs and/or Branches, may terminate or suspend an individual's involvement in the PSO and BPSO roles if there are concerns regarding suitability, current physical or cognitive capacity to deliver the PSP, conflicts with other commitments at Surf Lifesaving, where there are conduct issues or concerns relating to unethical behaviour/ unjustified breaches of confidentiality or privacy.