

Optimism ahead of new uniform OHS laws

■ Emily Morgan

THE harmonisation of occupational health and safety laws across Australia will offer more opportunities than burdensome compliance requirements for community organisations, according to some of the state's volunteer-based not for profits.

Western Australia will be one of the last jurisdictions to adopt the national OHS rules and regulations when it makes the change in January 2013.

Under the new regime, not for profits that have a volunteer base as well as paid employees will need uniform standards of training, professional development and administrative employment requirements across their workforce.

Depending on the current operations that will mean expanding internal employee databases and administration, potentially broadening insurance coverage, reviewing current policies and procedures and obtaining legal advice to do so. All of this will have financial implications.

SolarisCare chief executive David Edwards is optimistic about the changes, and said while there was time for organisations to comply, he hoped for assistance programs to be delivered to aid in the stages of compliance.

"The issues for us probably surround the financial impacts that may come to pass," he said.

"It is worth acknowledging Volunteering Australia and Safe Work Australia have recently been talking about some potential assistance packages in those arenas."

Reducing red tape for organisations operating across jurisdictions is one of the benefits expected to flow from the changes, and Mr



POTENTIAL: Lifeline WA chief executive Fiona Kalaf is confident new occupational health and safety laws will offer opportunity, not burdens, to not for profits. **Photo:** Grant Currall

Edwards said it offered ease to organisations planning growth in their services.

"Whether it is for us or other not-for-profit organisations, if they are looking to expand beyond their current jurisdiction, if laws are more harmonised it makes that transfer of skills, knowledge and intent much easier," he said.

SolarisCare is a WA-based cancer patient support organisation operating in four geographic centres with eight full-time equivalent staff and 150 volunteers.

Aged care and community services organisation MercyCare has 130 volunteers and 1,150 staff, while

mental health support organisation Lifeline WA has 150 volunteers and 19.5 full-time-equivalent staff.

WA Business News spoke with representatives from all three organisations, with the overall sentiment being one of optimism about the costs and human capital required.

MercyCare executive director, people and organisational services, Mark Loader told *WA Business News* large organisations such as MercyCare were already running uniform standards of OHS across their volunteer and employee bases.

"In the new regime we more or less have to treat volunteers like an employee. We do that now in

terms of our recruitment and training, we reward them for what they do, we reference check etc, so for MercyCare it probably won't have a significant effect," Mr Loader said.

Despite Solariscare having a significantly smaller employee base, Mr Edwards shared that sentiment and said if an organisation valued its volunteers, it would find a way to offer the greatest support possible.

"Volunteers are such a valuable resource that not-for-profit organisations already look at taking due duty of care to their volunteers," he said.

Lifeline WA chief executive Fiona Kalaf said the impact of the

changes would depend on an organisation's operations.

"There will be an impact, but it will be a variable impact and that's the challenge," she said.

"The impact on an NFP could vary from virtually no change to considerable change, with an organisation having to expend considerable resources to become compliant. It really depends on what is already in place within the given NFP."

"NFPs traditionally allocate their resources to their mission, placing other calls on their funds of secondary importance. In some cases, this will mean that organisations with limited funding and limited human resource capital may well be in a position where they will need to redirect resources or find additional funding as well as spend considerable effort in order to become compliant."

Lifeline already operates under a high standard of OHS regulations, Ms Kalaf said, and the organisation was taking the opportunity to review and improve its approach to OHS overall.

"At this stage, Lifeline WA doesn't have any specific concerns about complying with the new measures as we already have in place resource allocation to relevant OHS requirements," Ms Kalaf told *WA Business News*.

Mr Edwards said he hoped the changes did not act as a disincentive to volunteering. He hopes recent discussions between Volunteering Australia, Safe Work Australia and the federal minister would clarify the practical consequences for current volunteers and those considering volunteering.

"The only way you really get clarity in these situations is by making sure there are concise, clear statements that come out and really ensure that people have good information at hand," Mr Edwards said.

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