

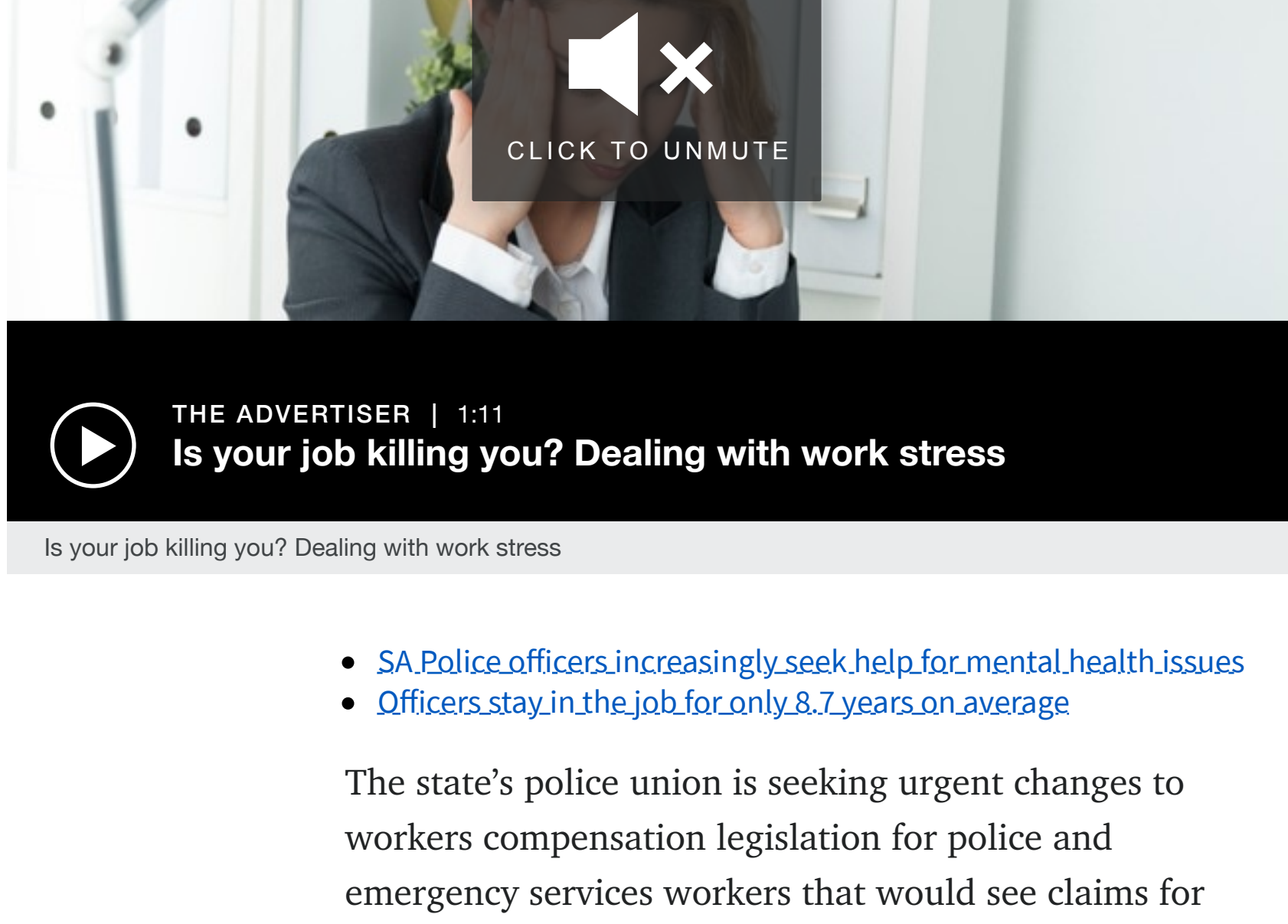
True Crime Australia > Police & Courts

Police union wants workers compensation treatment fast-tracked for officers suffering psychological trauma

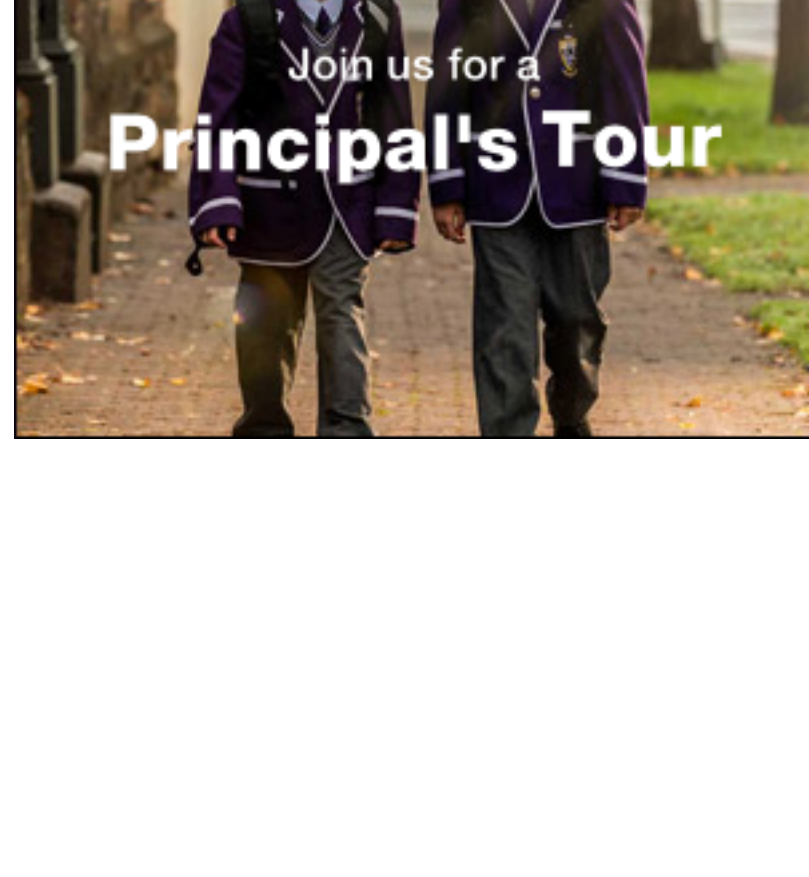
The police union wants claims of psychological injury for law enforcement and emergency services workers to be automatically accepted to ensure they receive rapid treatment — instead of enduring significant delays.

Nigel Hunt
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- SA Police officers increasingly seek help for mental health issues
- Officers stay in the job for only 8.7 years on average

The state's police union is seeking urgent changes to workers compensation legislation for police and emergency services workers that would see claims for psychological injury automatically accepted.

The union wants a presumptive acceptance system introduced that acknowledges the psychological injury occurred as a result of the officers' occupation, unless their employer can prove otherwise.

It would enable the officer to obtain immediate medical and psychological assistance and replace the present adversarial process that can take months to complete — and often compounds the victim's suffering.

The moves follow shock findings in a Beyond Blue survey that found one in three police and emergency services workers experience high or very high psychological distress, compared with one in eight Australian adults.

It found three in four police and emergency services workers who had made a claim for psychological injury found the current workers compensation process "to be detrimental to their recovery".

Crucially, it found emergency services workers were three times more likely to have a suicide plan and had suicidal thoughts twice as often as the general population.

Association president Mark Carroll said the Beyond Blue findings mirrored PASA's own survey of its members that first focused attention on the issue a decade ago.



Police Association president Mark Carroll.

"We do not need any more research in this area. We know the problem, now it is time for action," he said.

Initial discussions with Police Minister Corey Wingard were underway and Mr Carroll said he was "hopeful" the current system could be changed.

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The Queensland, Victorian and Tasmanian governments are in the process of introducing the presumptive system, with the latter already accepting claims in this manner.

Mr Carroll said the present system was hampering the recovery of police who suffered such injuries because of the claim process and "in-built delays" in treatment commencing.

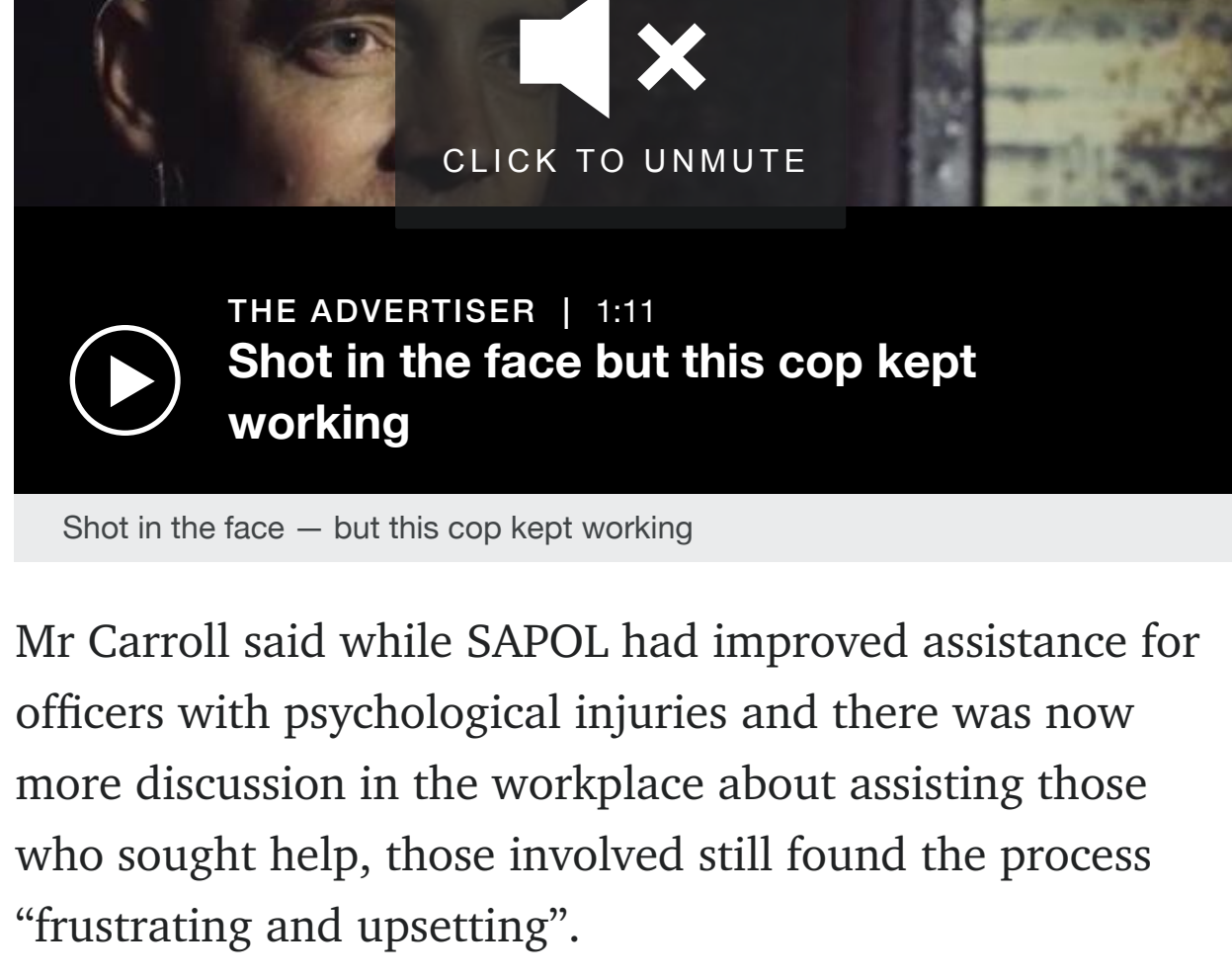
"If I put my hand up and reveal I have a psychological injury, the system should be geared to accept it and provide immediate support and assistance to get me back to work," he said.

"We want the government to introduce presumptive legislation so that if police and emergency services workers present with mental ill health, it is accepted as a result of their occupation unless the employer can prove otherwise," he said.

"That will bring provisional acceptance of a claim so the worker can access straight away the treatment they need to recover."

Mr Carroll also revealed he had asked Police Commissioner Grant Stevens to conduct a full audit of SA Police's claims procedures to reduce the revictimisation of those making such a claim.

Last financial year SAPOL recorded 79 mental stress claims, compared with 82 in 2016/17.



Mr Carroll said while SAPOL had improved assistance for officers with psychological injuries and there was now more discussion in the workplace about assisting those who sought help, those involved still found the process "frustrating and upsetting".

"Anyone who puts their hand up and says I have PTSD or another mental illness, then the whole system should be about getting them back to work as quickly as possible," he said.

"The whole system should be geared towards that, people should not be frightened to put their hand up and say they have mental ill-health because we know that one in five Australians do.

"We know the longer an officer serves the more they are likely to be injured psychologically."

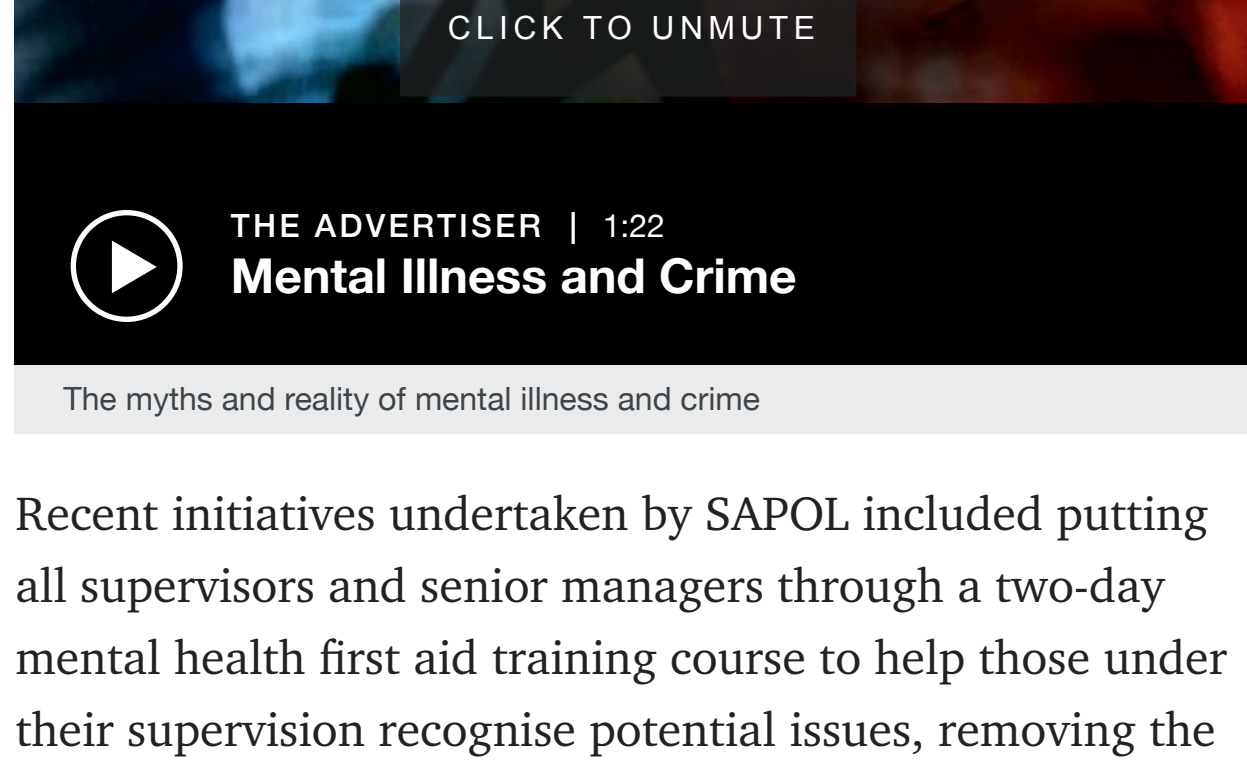
Assistant Commissioner (Human Resources) Linda Fellows said the Beyond Blue findings were not a surprise and had reinforced SAPOL's own data.

She said a review process around workers compensation has been ongoing for several years and the organisation had been putting a significant internal focus on mental health awareness.

"We have been trying to prevent getting to the point of a claim because it is never a good experience for someone who is suffering a mental health issue," she said.

"We really focus on trying to reduce the stigma and provide opportunities to intervene early because the research tells us the sooner you can intervene and provide assistance the better the recovery will be.

"Once they are at the point of a catastrophic mental health issue it is a very hard road to recovery."



Recent initiatives undertaken by SAPOL included putting all supervisors and senior managers through a two-day mental health first aid training course to help those under their supervision recognise potential issues, removing the stigma around mental health by improving awareness in the workplace and focusing on early intervention.

"It is an illness just like any other injury that happens and it can be cured and is preventable," Ms Fellows said.

At present firefighters are the only emergency services workers covered by presumptive acceptance legislation, but only for certain types of cancers and diseases caused by hazardous substances.

Mr Wingard said the mental health of police and emergency workers is "of great importance" and he would work with the Treasurer and Police Association on the proposed reforms, which would require Parliament to amend the Return to Work Act.

If you need help with personal or psychological issues, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or BeyondBlue on 1300 224 636



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