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Media Statement - 29 February 2024

STATEMENT ON THE JOINT EMERGENCY SERVICES CENTRE – GUNG AHLIN

The identification of lead and diesel particulates at the Joint Emergency Services Centre - Gungahlin (JESC) is a matter of the gravest concern, which necessitates an immediate and comprehensive response from the ACT Government.

Let us be clear on what has potentially occurred. Emergency services personnel working and community members visiting the JESC for decades may have been exposed to deadly lead dust and diesel particulates on a daily basis. Firefighters are exposed to carcinogens at incidents throughout their careers, and it verges on culpability that they have been further exposed to carcinogens and neurotoxins at a fire station where exposure is avoidable.

This extended exposure may have severely, permanently, and potentially fatally impacted the health of emergency services personnel who've worked at the JESC over several years.

This incident clearly illustrates the urgent need for the implementation of workplace safety monitoring, including of diesel particulates and other toxic substances, at all emergency services facilities to enable the early detection of toxic health threats.

Additionally, this incident provides irrefutable evidence to support the argument that health monitoring for emergency services personnel is urgently required, to identify the impact of unsafe working conditions and to mitigate the negative impact on their health through early intervention. Health monitoring for firefighters was agreed in 2020 but has not been implemented.

It is now incumbent on the ACT Government to launch a complete and comprehensive investigation into how the contamination problem at JESC was initially created and how it was permitted to continue undetected for such an extended period of time. Today, the UFU has written to Worksafe ACT urging an investigation with a view to prosecution.

That investigation must include an immediate health assessment for all emergency services personnel who have worked in the JESC. Ongoing health monitoring must also be provided for emergency services personnel who have worked at the JESC.

If these toxins have been allowed to accumulate unnoticed at Gungahlin, it is probable that the duty to monitor conditions at other fire and emergency facilities has been neglected. Any investigation must call up all records of monitoring conducted at other fire stations.

The Gungahlin JESC is the fourth newest fire station in the ACT, with five fire stations of a much greater age. Some of these fire stations date back to the 1960s. They are not fit for purpose and may suffer similar faults and contain the same contamination issues.

An immediate investigation must be undertaken to determine the safety of these workplace environments for emergency services personnel. Further, we need to obtain a commitment from the ACT Government to progressively upgrade or replace these out of date and potentially hazardous fire stations.

Upon completion of the inquiry's report, serious consideration must be given to prosecuting those individuals or organisations responsible for creating the JESC contamination issue and those who, through negligence or dereliction of responsibility, permitted it to continue for such an extended period in a manner



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that has now potentially undermined the health and well-being of hundreds of emergency services personnel.

The concerning events of the last 24 hours are another example of how firefighters have been failed by the Justice Directorate with respect to facilities management. This failure includes the unacceptable delays in building new fire stations at Acton and Molonglo. Ultimately, funding should be provided to the fire service to build and manage these facilities itself.

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