



Professional Standard 5 – Staff Wellbeing (Summary)

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Professional Standard 5 –Staff Wellbeing (Summary)

1. Purpose

To promote and support the holistic physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of all individuals involved in training, handling, and caring for working animals, recognising its direct impact on both human and animal welfare and performance. This includes acknowledging challenges such as grief and loss, secondary/vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, moral injury, stress, burnout, and cognitive bias.

2. Scope

This Standard applies to all WAFA members, including staff, volunteers, trainers, handlers, and carers engaged in any role related to assistance animal services.

3. Standard Statement

WAFA members must implement proactive strategies, policies, and practices that foster a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment prioritising the wellbeing of all human participants. This includes mental health support, stress management, education on psychological risks such as compassion fatigue, moral injury, and secondary trauma, and structured debriefing following critical incidents to mitigate burnout and cognitive bias.

4. Definitions

- **Grief and Loss:** Emotional responses to the loss of an animal, client, or significant event affecting wellbeing.
- **Secondary/Vicarious Trauma:** Trauma experienced indirectly through exposure to others' distress or trauma.
- **Compassion Fatigue:** Emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged caregiving in distressing contexts.
- **Moral Injury:** Psychological distress from actions or events that violate personal ethical or moral beliefs.
- **Stress:** The body's response to physical, mental, or emotional pressure.
- **Burnout:** A state of chronic physical and emotional exhaustion often accompanied by cynicism or reduced efficacy.
- **Cognitive Bias:** Systematic patterns of deviation from rational judgement that can affect decision-making under stress.
- **Critical Incident:** Any event that causes significant distress or trauma to handlers, staff, or animals (e.g., serious injury, client crisis).
- **Debriefing:** A structured process of discussing a critical incident to provide psychological support and promote recovery.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

- **Board:** Responsible for governance, setting strategic direction, risk management, financial oversight, and compliance with WAFA standards.
- **Senior Leadership:** Implements board policies and manages day-to-day operations.
- **Staff and Volunteers:** Support organisational objectives under leadership direction and adhere to governance policies.

13.1 Wellbeing Policies

WAFA members must develop, document, implement, and regularly review internal policies that actively support the holistic wellbeing of all staff, volunteers, trainers, and handlers. These policies must:

- Address common psychological risks in the assistance animal sector, including:
 - Mental health concerns related to prolonged emotional labour and caregiving
 - Stress management strategies and the identification of acute and chronic stress triggers
 - Work-life balance, including flexible work arrangements, manageable caseloads, and boundaries between work and personal life
 - Grief and loss, including the emotional impact of animal retirement, rehoming, death, client disengagement, or sudden incident
 - Compassion fatigue, which may arise from ongoing exposure to trauma, crisis situations, or high emotional demands from clients and animals
 - Moral injury, especially when workers are placed in ethically distressing situations or cannot uphold their personal or professional values
 - Burnout, including preventative strategies such as rest cycles, leave entitlements, and workload management
 - Cognitive bias, particularly decision fatigue or reduced judgement under emotional pressure or exhaustion
- Include clear procedures for identifying, reporting, and managing signs of distress, including internal escalation pathways and external referral options.
- Be co-designed where possible with input from staff and handlers, including people with lived experience of disability, trauma, or mental health conditions.
- Integrate with other organisational frameworks, including incident reporting, performance management, supervision, and team development plans.
- Be accessible and visible to all staff, volunteers, and clients as appropriate, and included in onboarding, training, and supervision documentation.

- Ensure leadership accountability, requiring managers and senior staff to model and reinforce wellbeing-focused culture and practices.

13.2 Access to Support Services

WAFA members must actively facilitate timely and appropriate access to a range of mental health and psychosocial support services for all individuals involved in their programs, including staff and volunteers. This access must reflect the unique and cumulative demands of working in emotionally intensive, animal-centred roles.

Support services must include or enable:

- Professional counselling and mental health care, through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), referral pathways, or funded external supports.
- Peer support structures, including facilitated discussion groups, informal peer mentoring, or lived experience networks, particularly for handlers and carers who may experience isolation.
- Support for vicarious trauma and secondary trauma, recognising the emotional toll of witnessing distressing events or supporting clients who have experienced trauma.
- Grief and loss counselling, particularly in cases involving:
 - Retirement, injury, or death of an animal
 - Unforeseen separation from an animal (e.g., failed placement, rehoming)
 - Client regression or sudden disengagement
- Crisis support and critical incident response, ensuring access to timely psychological first aid or trauma-informed debriefing.
- Support during formal processes, such as complaint investigations or legal proceedings, where individuals may experience moral injury, stress, or reputational distress.
- Equitable access for all participants, including those in remote or regional locations, people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and people with lived experience of mental ill-health.
- Confidentiality and voluntary participation must be guaranteed in all support services, with mechanisms for anonymous access or third-party referral where requested.

These supports must be clearly communicated to all staff and program participants, integrated into induction and wellbeing policies, and reviewed annually to ensure relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness.

13.3 Work Environment

WAFA members must maintain a safe, respectful, inclusive, and trauma-informed workplace culture that recognises the unique emotional, physical, and ethical demands of working with

assistance animals. This includes both formal and informal workspaces where staff, volunteers, handlers, and carers interact, train, or provide services.

Key requirements include:

- Psychologically safe environments where individuals feel supported to speak up, disclose difficulties, and request support without fear of reprisal or judgment.
- Recognition of the emotional labour involved in animal training, disability support, and crisis-response roles — including the cumulative impacts of compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary trauma, and moral injury.
- Visible leadership commitment to wellbeing and respect, including role-modelling of healthy work habits, realistic workloads, and active inclusion of wellbeing in supervision and team discussions.
- Prevention of stigma through anti-discrimination measures, inclusive language, and proactive efforts to normalise conversations about mental health, trauma, and stress recovery.
- Inclusive and flexible practices that support staff and handlers from diverse backgrounds, including people with disability, First Nations peoples, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those with caring responsibilities.
- Access to safe spaces or accommodations, such as quiet rooms, sensory-friendly areas, or flexible rostering for those managing fatigue, mental health recovery, or carer duties.
- Clear expectations and respectful communication, ensuring all team members understand their rights and responsibilities, particularly during high-stress or high-emotion situations.
- Immediate and appropriate responses to incidents of bullying, harassment, or discrimination, with documented procedures and protections for affected individuals.

This culture must be embedded through induction, supervision, leadership modelling, internal policies, and all aspects of daily practice. Members are encouraged to adopt trauma-informed workplace frameworks and commit to regular reflection and improvement of their organisational climate.

13.4 Training on Wellbeing

WAFA members must ensure that all staff, volunteers, handlers, and relevant stakeholders receive regular, evidence-informed training on mental health and emotional wellbeing, tailored to the unique challenges of working with assistance animals and people with disability.

Key training components must include:

- Recognition of early warning signs of stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, grief and loss, moral injury, secondary or vicarious trauma, and cognitive bias that can impair judgement, reduce empathy, or affect animal welfare.

- Understanding trauma and emotional labour, including the psychological impact of high-stakes situations, ethical conflict, and long-term caring roles.
- Resilience and self-care strategies, including practical tools such as grounding techniques, reflective practice, boundary-setting, recovery planning, and use of support systems.
- Debriefing protocols and help-seeking behaviours, encouraging a proactive approach to mental health through both peer and professional support.
- Cognitive and emotional hygiene, with strategies to reduce negative spirals, reframe internal narratives, and promote sustained capacity for empathy and care.
- Context-specific examples and scenarios, such as loss of a working animal, traumatic public incidents, difficult client interactions, or confronting welfare concerns.

Training should be:

- Delivered at induction, with refresher training annually or after major incidents.
- Adapted for role relevance (e.g., trainers, foster carers, admin staff, client-facing roles).
- Accessible in format and content, using plain English, trauma-informed principles, and inclusive practices.

This training must be documented, evaluated, and embedded as a core component of organisational capacity and risk management. WAFA encourages members to engage lived experience educators and mental health professionals in co-design and delivery of these sessions.

13.5 Incident Response

WAFA members must develop and implement clear, trauma-informed protocols to support staff, volunteers, and handlers following critical incidents or emotionally distressing events that may impact wellbeing, safety, or animal welfare.

Protocols must include:

- Definition of a critical incident, may include but not limited to:
 - Sudden injury, illness, or death of a working animal
 - Animal attack, loss, or public access confrontation
 - Witnessing or being involved in abuse, discrimination, or traumatic events
 - Client disclosures of harm, crisis situations, or unexpected behavioural escalations
 - Staff exposure to secondary or vicarious trauma
- Immediate response procedures, including:
 - Ensuring physical safety and containment of the situation
 - Notifying designated support personnel or supervisors

- Offering and facilitating psychological first aid within 24–72 hours
- Respecting privacy, emotional readiness, and cultural needs
- Debriefing and follow-up, including:
 - Access to structured debriefing with a qualified facilitator
 - Encouragement of peer support or shared reflection spaces
 - Referral to professional counselling or mental health services
 - Ongoing monitoring for delayed or cumulative stress responses
- Adaptation of workload or duties as needed to allow for rest, recovery, or reflection without penalty or stigma
- Documentation and learning, including incident reporting that promotes continuous improvement without blame, and use of incidents as learning tools to improve safety, preparedness, and team resilience

These protocols must be regularly reviewed, well-communicated, and integrated into broader risk management, staff wellbeing, and animal welfare strategies. Staff and volunteers must be trained in their use and encouraged to speak up when support is needed.

14. Review, Revision and Approvals

This policy will be reviewed annually by the steering committee to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. Any revisions will require approval from the steering committee.

15. Implementation

WAFA members must integrate these standards into governance frameworks, operational policies, financial management, human resources, and client service delivery to maintain high standards of accountability and organisational integrity.

16. Enforcement

WAFA enforces these standards through its accreditation and audit processes. Non-compliance will lead to remedial actions and may impact ongoing WAFA membership and certification status.

17. Contact Information

For further information or assistance related to this standard, please contact the steering committee at the following email address: admin@workinganimals.com.au

Document Control

Version	Date	Author	Change Description	Approved By
V1.0	17/05/2025	V. Solomon	Initial	C.Williams