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NSW Rural Fire Service welcomes a cuddly new recruit

2500 'Gentle Bears' have arrived at Rural Fire Service brigades across the state, ready to support and care for children who experience traumatic incidents.

Gentle Bear was the brainchild of Gallagher Bassett and the South Australian Police Department who wanted to do more to help the children they were coming into contact with when responding to 000 calls.

"Gentle Bear acts as an emotional aid for children in emergency situations like house fires or serious road traffic accidents," said Gallagher Bassett CEO, John McNamara.

"These bears distract a child's attention from the immediate, distressing situation by providing a reassuring and safe object to latch on to."

Gallagher Bassett has now partnered with Insurance and Care NSW (icare) to bring Gentle Bear to NSW. To date in 2019, 5,000 Gentle Bears have been donated to NSW Rural Fire Service brigades in 46 locations in NSW.

icare provides workers compensation insurance to NSW government agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service. icare recognised that Gentle Bear could play a role protecting RFS volunteers.

"Volunteer firefighters do an amazing job taking care of the community in times of crisis, however, the trauma associated with these situations can negatively impact the mental health of volunteers," said icare's General Manager of Agency Engagement, Britt Coombe.

"As the workers compensation insurer for NSW, we know that psychological injuries are amongst the most costly and most life changing."

Research has shown that giving support to others can reduce physiological stress responses during times of trauma, with the act of giving itself contributing to beneficial health outcomes.

"Gentle Bear represented an opportunity for us to support the mental health and wellbeing of NSW's volunteer firefighters. We hope Gentle Bear will not only benefit the children who are affected by emergency situations, but that it will also look out for the wellbeing of our volunteer fire fighters who are able to 'doing something' in a situation that can otherwise make them feel powerless," Ms Coombe said.

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***About icare NSW:** We provide workers compensation insurance to more than 326,000 public and private sector employers in NSW and their 3.6 million employees. In addition, we insure builders and homeowners, provide treatment and care to people severely injured on NSW roads; and protect more than \$193 billion of NSW Government assets, including the Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, schools and hospitals.*