

Peer Assistance Network – A ‘Safe Harbour’

Since its inception in 2015, a peer support programme designed to help stressed or troubled aviation workers has helped 150 of them get back on track.

Before contacting the Peer Assistance Network (PAN), an international airline first officer had tried to take his own life in a hotel room.

He'd been suffering from undiagnosed depression – the result of a chemical imbalance – for some time, and hadn't wanted to talk about it for fear of losing his career.

Two months after seeking the help he needed, he was feeling better and back flying.

In the two years since PAN arrived in New Zealand (modelled on a 20-year old Qantas Australia programme) it's helped more than 150 aviation professionals, from trainees to senior airline captains and air traffic controllers.

"Their issues have ranged from relationship difficulties, to earthquake stress, to overwhelming anxiety about upcoming sim tests," says Captain Andy Pender, the medical and welfare director of the air line pilots' association, NZALPA.

Central to PAN is a volunteer network of aviation professionals, who all understand the special pressure of working in the industry. They've been trained by psychologists, as well as

specialists in suicide prevention, grief counselling, and listening skills, among other experts, to be the first point of contact for someone who wants to talk.

They've also been coached in where the resources are that can offer practical help – such as financial assistance, an employment mediation service, and the HIMS* programme.

If necessary, a PAN peer support volunteer refers someone to a medical professional.

It costs an airline organisation \$20 per person to have their staff covered by PAN, and so far, Air New Zealand, Virgin Australia and Jetconnect have signed up.

But the programme is strictly non-commercial.

"Even if aviation workers – who are neither covered, nor NZALPA members – call us," says Andy, "we will not turn them away."

While an increasing number of employers are referring their workers – and their employees are reportedly relieved to be referred – self-referring is still rare.

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* Human Intervention Motivation Study – aims to help aviation professionals whose use of alcohol or other drugs is of concern. www.hims.org.nz.

“We have this culture of soldiering on”, says Andy. “Anything that smacks of struggling with emotional issues has largely been – and for some, still is – a source of shame.

“But troughs and peaks are part of life. Seeking help is just a sensible move in looking after yourself.

“I think attitudes are changing however – certainly among younger people. Mental health issues, and especially the need to talk about them, are being discussed more openly in wider New Zealand society. That’s making it more acceptable for both men and women to seek out some help.”

Andy says NZALPA is currently recruiting for senior PAN volunteers who older aviation workers might be more ready to open up to. A women-only assistance service is also being established. The programme is also wanting to encourage more GA workers to use the service.

“Any aviation professional in New Zealand, if they’re going through a period of low mood, stress, or anxiety – things are

just not quite right – we want PAN to be at the forefront of their mind. Whether they’re the captain of a Boeing 777 or the captain of Cherokee PA28-140, it doesn’t matter.

“We need every pilot in New Zealand to know that there is a confidential, secure, trusted service that they can call upon, without risk, to say, ‘hey, is it normal that for a couple of days every now and again I’m not feeling quite right? Can we have a chat about that?’

“People can be reassured that the thoughts and feelings they’re experiencing are completely normal, and we can help them to get it sorted.

“Ultimately, PAN is about improving aviation safety in New Zealand, and that means being there for anyone in the industry who needs a ‘safe harbour’ for a while.”

Anyone wanting to talk can ring 0800 NZALPA – 0800 692 572 – and ask to speak to the PAN programme. There’s someone available 24 hours. ■

On the Web

PPL Medical Certification Review

In one of the larger responses the CAA has received from the aviation community on an issue, there were 299 submissions during consultation on the Private Pilot Licence medical certification review.

See www.caa.govt.nz, “Quick Links > Rules > Regulatory Policy” for a summary of the responses.

CAA Annual Report

Record passenger numbers, the growth of threats to aviation security, new technologies, and the huge growth in drone ownership are among the challenges the CAA faced in its 2016–2017 year.

The CAA’s Annual Report is now on the CAA web site, www.caa.govt.nz, see “About Us > Annual Reports and Statements of Intent”.

RIU Annual Report

On the same web page is the 2016–2017 report of the Regulatory Investigations Unit, outlining to the aviation sector and public the actions taken by the unit over that time period. ■



Small Issues Project

With the signing of the Small Issues 2016–17 Rule package by the former Associate Minister of Transport, Tim Macindoe, the first CAA Notice came into effect on 30 October 2017.

The rule package made changes to separate Parts, each of which alone did not justify a separate proposal.

The issues in the project are associated with:

- » reporting of tonnage on freight flights (Part 12)
- » maintenance of large balloons (Part 43)
- » airworthiness review period for non-hire or reward aircraft (Part 91), see www.caa.govt.nz/aircraft
- » manipulation of flight controls in adventure aviation (Part 115)
- » EDTO requirements (Part 121)
- » options for calculating runway landing distances (Parts 121, 125, 135)
- » emergency landings for SEIFR passenger operations (Part 125)
- » Robinson R22s and R44s (Part 61).

The amendment relating to Robinson helicopters allows the Director of Civil Aviation, using a CAA Notice, to impose requirements and conditions regarding the use and operation of Robinson helicopters.

Such Notices are limited to the scope of the empowering rule. They allow for greater flexibility and responsiveness to changing technical standards and requirements than through the more substantive rule-making process.

More information about these amendments can be found on the CAA web site, www.caa.govt.nz/rules. ■