

Enhancing Public Information practice during the response phase, in Tasmania's emergency services (Tasmania Fire Service & State Emergency Service)

Ten years on from the Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires Public Information during response, what have we learnt?

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission findings stated that Public Information (PI) during the response phase up until 2009 failed to reflect the quantity, demands and priority surrounding information management in the 21st Century (Parliament of Victoria 2010).

At an international level, one of the driving factors for public information during the response phase is the United Nations' Sendai Framework for Disasters and Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (United Nations 2015).

Areas identified in the literature to inform future enhancement include recognition and identification of the importance of working within an integrated emergency management model across all hazards, where prevention, preparedness and response are linked, and a community resilience approach is taken.

Tackling the challenges of; vulnerable technology, community and stakeholder relationships, increasing public expectations, gaps in understanding behavioural change, organisational culture and leadership, and vulnerable populations.

The importance of planning and preparing for public information during response. Sound leadership and capable personnel are identified **as key factors to systematic success**, with a continued shift towards a greater focus on impact based warnings.

Findings from both the Tasmanian survey and the literature identify two key themes: training and building capacity of new and existing PI staff, and systems development for the enhancement of PI during the emergency response phase within the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) and State Emergency Service (SES). These themes form the basis of key recommendations to emergency services in Tasmania.

Literature

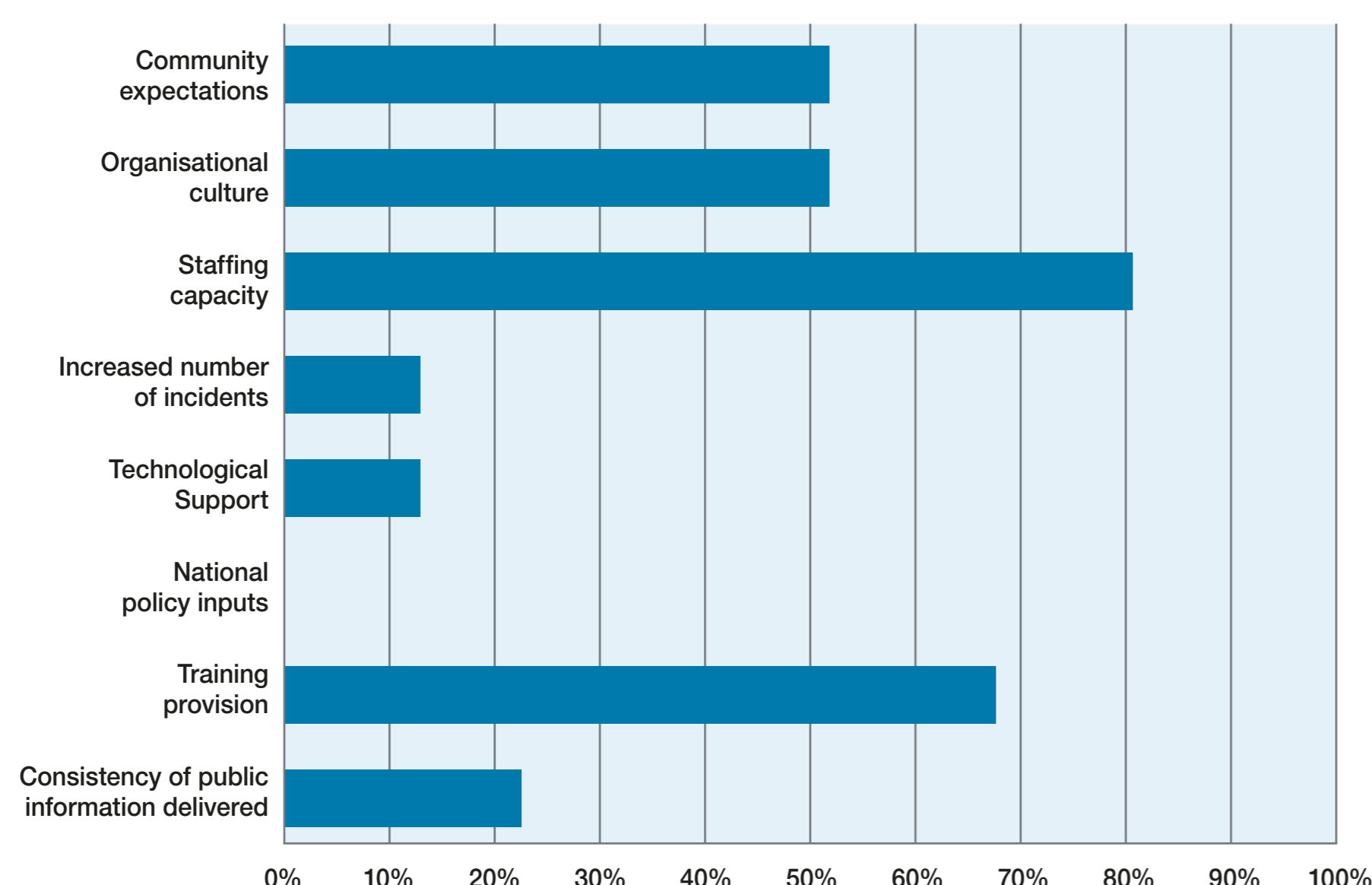
The literature between 2009 and 2018 shows that **significant progress and enhancement has been made in the PI response field since 2009**. The literature can be synthesized into four themes; systematic influence, challenges, an evolving field that is rapidly changing, future directions and solutions.

Public information needs to be planned and organised through the use of strong systems, clear leadership and capable personnel identified as key factors to systematic success. There is also a continuing shift towards a greater focus on impact based warnings.

Research methods

The research methods selected were a literature review and an online survey of TFS and SES staff that have worked in the PI response field. The 'Public Information during response' survey was distributed by email to 94 staff (SES-13, TFS-81) utilising the Survey Monkey software. A total of 31 respondents (32.98%) completed the survey, with 25 being from TFS (80.65%) and 6 being from SES (19.35%). Representation from TFS and SES was as expected, based on the numbers of PI response staff (SES-13, TFS-81).

Sample from survey results – Three greatest challenges identified by staff working in public information



ABC, 2013: Tasmanian Bushfires - Dunalley

There are a series of challenges and barriers to the enhancement of PI response. Some of the challenges identified in the literature include; technology being vulnerable – (Burns, Robinson & Smith 2010, Cao, Boruff & McNeill 2017, Emergency Management Victoria 2014), a shift towards 'joint public information systems' – (Anderson-Berry et al. 2018, Basher 2006 2018, Hall 2007), relationships between stakeholders and the community – (Steelman & Mccaffrey 2013), gaps in understanding behavioural change – (Burns, Robinson & Smith et al. 2010, Leadbeater 2010, Shevellar & Riggs et al. 2015, Steelman and Mccaffrey 2013), Vulnerable populations, E.g. the elderly and tourists – (Mayhorn 2005) and organisational culture (Pearson & Clair 1998, Bunker & Smith 2009).

Culturally, Hall (2007) discusses that we cannot achieve effective public information until the focus is placed on the leadership role of emergency management in providing effective early warning capability. A suggested solution to this is through increased integration with science and technology, and commitment and involvement of all at risk to disasters, a 'shared responsibility' approach. Hall (2007) discusses the value of providing impact based warnings and the importance of and rights of the community being kept informed. Of note, is the identification of the shift in the emergency management paradigm from emergency response to prevention and preparedness being more integrated with response (Hall 2007).

Recommendations

Some of the recommendations can be considered nationally as well as within the TFS and SES, however due to the nature and scope of the study it is recognised that the findings are indicative only. Recommendations are across two themes:

1. Training and building capacity of our people

Plan and conduct accredited PI training. Recruit, raise and sustain additional suitable staff through an expression of interest process to build the capacity of PI over the next two years. Provide development opportunities, including a PI workshop, exercises and mentoring opportunities. Increase the knowledge and familiarity of TFS and SES doctrine in the area of PI response.

2. Systems

Continue to implement, embed and formalise the state-wide TFS and SES PI Coordination Group that was established in 2018 to support the ongoing review and enhancement of PI systems.

Establish guidelines and minimal standards around reference to policies and the implementation of a state on-call PI officer role for the bushfire danger period.

Peter Middleton – Peter.Middleton@fire.tas.gov.au

Charles Sturt University Masters Graduate 2018 / BNHCRC Scholarship Holder 2018
Coordinator Community Development, Tasmania Fire Service