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TOPICS IN THIS EDITION | NON-TRADITIONAL RECRUITMENT | RECRUITMENT | VOLUNTEERING

ENABLING EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER SUSTAINABILITY: RESOURCES FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This *Hazard Note* presents research conducted by Curtin University and the University of Western Australia for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC's *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering* project. Researchers investigated the effectiveness of volunteer recruitment, socialisation and retention strategies in the Western Australian State Emergency Service (WA SES), and developed tools that can assist multiple organisations and volunteer leaders in improving these practices.

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SUMMARY

Across Australia, volunteer workforce planners, managers and leaders in the emergency services work within a complex and dynamic space when seeking to sustain their volunteer workforces over time. Agencies are often looking for ways to improve volunteer recruitment, retention, onboarding, management and communication strategies.

Researchers worked closely with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia to develop reliable and up-to-date resources that support volunteer management.

The **Recruitment and Retention Toolkit for Emergency Volunteer Leaders** is based on relevant models of psychological behaviour and extensive new research with brigade, group and unit (BGU) leaders and volunteers. It is designed to assist with all stages of volunteer management and is accessible via the Future Workforce theme on the CRC's



▲ Above: THIS RESEARCH PROVIDES HELPFUL RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER MANAGERS IN THEIR RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS. PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES.

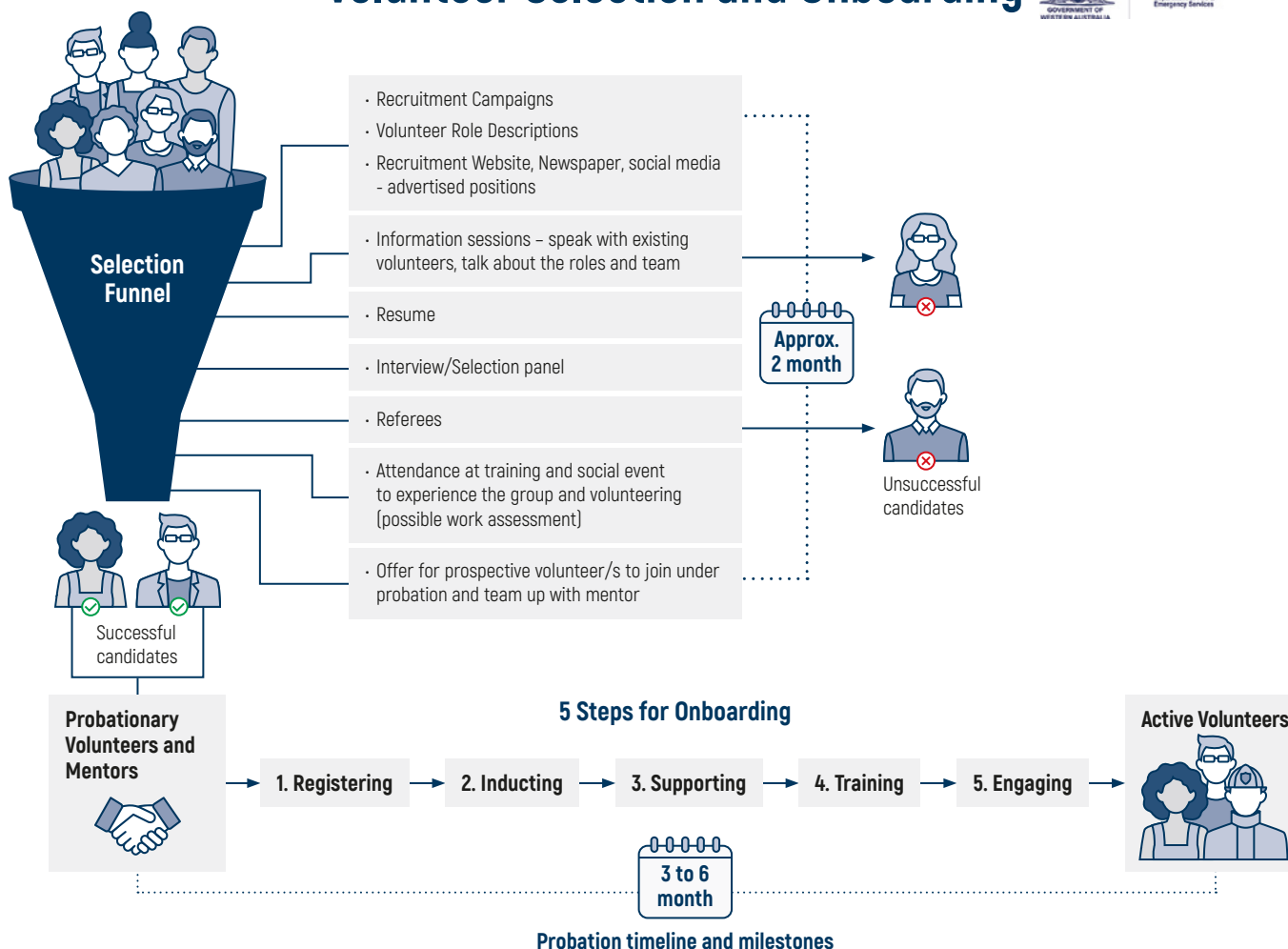
Driving Change resource, at www.bnhcrc.com.au/driving-change/future-workforce.

Researchers are currently developing a set of online training modules that combine the materials from these resources into a self-guided, accessible, interactive training pack for volunteer leaders and emergency service organisation staff who work with volunteers. This will be available in late-2021.

The **Recruitment Messaging Toolkit** further equips volunteer managers and recruitment officers to better design recruitment materials that include attractive and realistic messages that set the right expectations for prospective volunteers. It is being used by the WA SES and an expanded version for use by fire and emergency services across Australia will be more widely available in late 2021.



Volunteer Selection and Onboarding



▲ **Figure 1:** THE VOLUNTEER SELECTION AND ONBOARDING RECRUITMENT DIAGRAM IS ONE OF THE DIAGRAMS USED IN THE RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS FOR THE EMERGENCY SERVICES SECTION OF THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLKIT FOR EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER LEADERS. SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES, WA.

CONTEXT

Around 90 per cent of Australia's emergency service workforce (including fire) are volunteers. Sustaining the vibrancy, effectiveness and wellbeing of this volunteer workforce over time is critical for continued emergency service delivery. It is clear, however, that organisations cannot rely solely on the continued efficacy of past approaches to confront current and future challenges and opportunities.

BACKGROUND

The need to ensure a vibrant, sustainable and well-supported volunteer emergency service workforce into the future is centrally recognised in many organisational strategies (for example, QFES, 2018). It was also reinforced as a national issue in the final report of the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

However, there is no silver bullet for addressing volunteer sustainability. It is impacted by many factors interacting across multiple levels (McLennan et al. 2016). The roles and requirements of volunteer workforce planners, managers and leaders is complicated by the interactions between shifting external environmental conditions (for example, demographic shifts, rising demands on people's time, changes in modern volunteering styles, risk-averse government regulation), dynamics within the sector and its organisations (for example, resourcing arrangements, professionalisation and corporatisation, cultures) and the skills within volunteer teams (for example, leadership capacities, relationships, communication). Research-based resources that are up-to-date and designed to be highly useful can help confront this complex situation.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLKIT FOR EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER LEADERS

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC research

Researchers first conducted more than 70 face-to-face interviews with State Emergency Services (SES) volunteers across Western Australia (*Hazard Note 65*, see Kragt et al. 2019). These interviews examined volunteers' experiences with the service and explored views regarding recruitment and retention practices within SES units.

Using these interviews as the foundation, two questionnaires (using the Cultural Assessment Tool) were administered to further examine the volunteer experiences within the SES, investigating psychological needs' satisfaction, motivation, wellbeing, inclusiveness, leadership and intentions to continue volunteering. Using the findings from the 2018-19 Cultural

Assessment Tool as a basis for comparison, the 2019-20 Cultural Assessment Tool investigated which volunteering areas in the SES have remained the same, which improved from the previous year, and which had room for further improvement (see Muhammad Farid et al. 2021).

Working closely with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) in WA, a series of projects were conducted to investigate the current practices and processes that are used to recruit, onboard and manage emergency service volunteers. An outcome of these projects was to create a suite of resources that will better guide volunteer leaders and staff who work with volunteers on how to better recruit and retain volunteers.

To ensure that the resources were accessible and practical, face-to-face interviews and consultation with volunteer leaders across the different emergency services (e.g. Volunteer Fire and Rescue, State Emergency Service and Volunteer Marine Rescue) and DFES staff members were carried out to gain insights into what volunteer leaders are currently doing to recruit and retain their volunteers. Combining recommendations based on evidence-based practices and feedback received from volunteers, a suite of resources was created, including recommendations, tip sheets, templates, diagrams and case studies showcasing what is currently being practiced successfully in other volunteering groups.

These resources were workshopped with DFES volunteers and received recognition and positive feedback. As a result, a case was made by the researchers to present and bring awareness to the resources across different emergency services in Australia.

Using this resource

The Recruitment and Retention Toolkit is designed especially for BGU leaders in emergency service agencies. It is accessible on the CRC's Driving Change resource, at www.bnhcrc.com.au/driving-change/future-workforce

It includes easy-to-use guides about:

- Recruiting Volunteers for the Emergency Services – supporting BGU volunteer recruitment with tip sheets, recruitment diagrams and recruitment plans.
- Supporting New Volunteers – guiding the successful onboarding and socialisation of new emergency service volunteers, including an onboarding checklist, induction booklet templates and instructions.
- Managing Volunteers in the Emergency Services – tip sheets on how to motivate and manage emergency service volunteers effectively, including knowledge sharing and dealing with conflict.
- Volunteer Role Descriptions – explaining different volunteer role descriptions, why they're important and how to complete them, including templates.
- Volunteer Succession Planning – currently under development.

A/Prof Patrick Dunlop and Hawa Muhammad Farid, alongside Jennifer Pidgeon and Kathryn White from DFES, presented the Recruitment and Retention Toolkit to BGU leaders in an online showcase in October 2020, guiding leaders through some of the tools currently being used by DFES in their recruitment and retention

strategies. The recording of this showcase is available at www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/recruitment_toolkit_showcase.

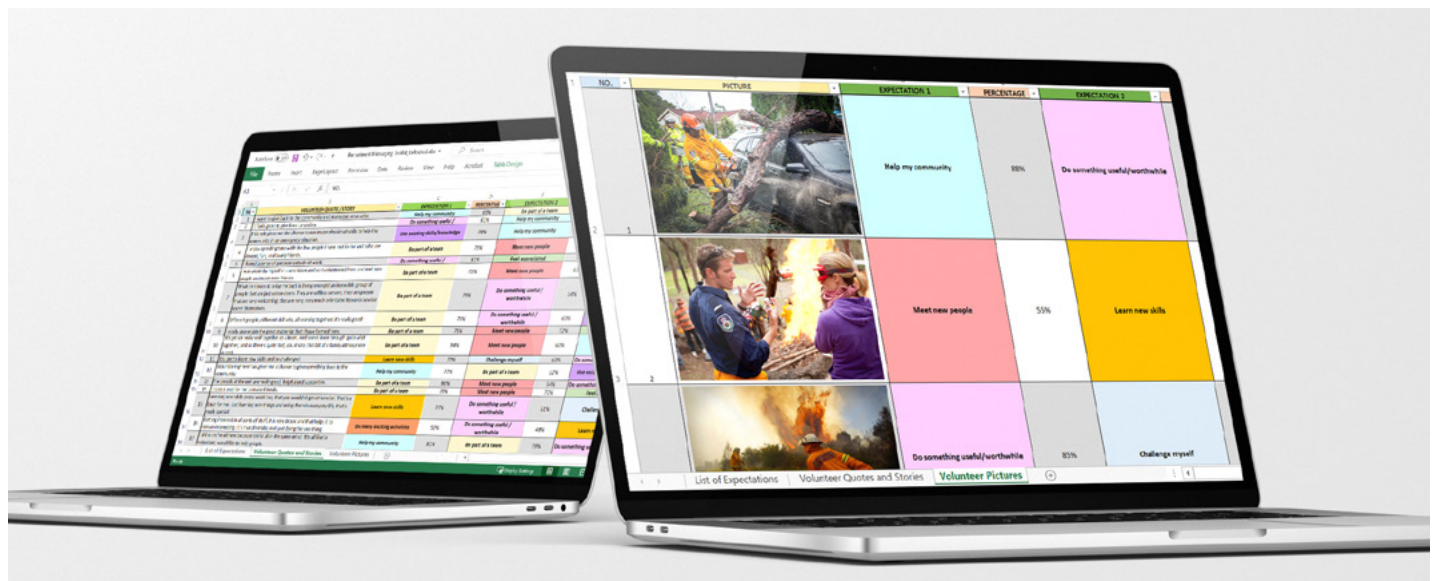
RECRUITMENT MESSAGING TOOLKIT

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC research

A series of quantitative studies were conducted to inform how volunteer recruitment messaging can set the expectations of new volunteers, and how meeting those expectations affects retention beyond 'the first day'. These studies provided an evidence base for effective volunteer recruitment messaging that can help resolve any mismatches between the experiences of new volunteers and the experiences they expected to have.

Recruitment messaging refers to the different components that might appear in volunteer recruitment materials (for example, posters, brochures, social media advertisements, newsletters). For this study, the messages took the form of quotes from current volunteers describing positive experiences collected during interviews, and photographs of volunteers depicting different operational and non-operational activities.

After collating a set of 109 quotes and 40 photographs, this study identified which ones were most suited for effective recruiting. From a larger set, researchers identified 61 quotes and 28 pictures that were rated as being accurate by current SES volunteers, and attractive by both current and potential volunteers. These messages were therefore viewed as viable candidates for a volunteer recruitment



Above: A SAMPLE FROM THE RECRUITMENT MESSAGING TOOLKIT, SHOWING VOLUNTEER PHOTOS AND THE IMPACT THAT SEEING THEM HAS ON EXPECTATIONS OF THE ROLE. SOURCE: CURTIN UNIVERSITY.

END-USER STATEMENT

“A highlight of this research was the engagement with volunteers in the design process, to draw out what is needed from the research and how that can be applied. One of the benefits of having a direct relationship with researchers is that we now have a useable and useful resource for our volunteers. By building the relationship, we’re able to build a bigger picture of what’s happening in our volunteer workforce, and develop and build a resource set that meets their needs. The long-term relationship with this particular research team means that they have a very good understanding of what is happening with our volunteers, as well as the broader volunteering environment, which leads to more useful resources being developed.”

**Jennifer Pidgeon, Strategic Volunteer and Youth Programs Manager,
Department of Fire and Emergency Services, Western Australia**

campaign. Researchers found, however, that the different messages set different expectations about the volunteer experience.

Following on from this, researchers then conducted a survey of active fire volunteers who were presented with 45 images and asked to rate their attractiveness and accuracy in representation of volunteering experience. These responses are currently being incorporated into the Recruitment Messaging Toolkit to ensure that the imagery used best represents fire service volunteers and their experiences.

Using this resource

The Recruitment Messaging Toolkit is being designed specifically to help volunteer leaders and recruitment officers select recruitment messages (for example, volunteer quotes, stories and photos) to include in their recruitment campaigns (for example, brochures, advertisements and posters). This will help ensure that the messages and campaigns 1) attract and appeal to potential volunteers, 2) accurately represent the volunteering experience and 3) set the right expectations based on what the individual BGU can offer.

A pilot version of the Recruitment Messaging Toolkit was presented and shared with volunteer leaders at the Western Australia Fire and Emergency Services Conference in September 2019. The final version will be expanded to include

the fire and emergency services and is expected to be finalised in late-2021.

The findings from the Recruitment Messaging Toolkit also informed the design of the DFES *Get Behind the Front Line* campaign intended to improve the recruitment of non-operational volunteers.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Researchers are using the material from these resources to create a set of self-guided, accessible, online training modules for volunteer leaders. The modules will give leaders an opportunity to engage with three interactive modules – volunteer onboarding, recruitment and management – which will each include several resources such as videos, thinking exercises, tip sheets and case studies. These online training modules will be available in late-2021.

This research is also contributing to a collection of research outputs at the CRC called ‘Workforce 2030’, including other research at Curtin University’s Future of Work Institute, alongside RMIT University, that will provide a snapshot of current research on emerging workforce challenges and opportunities that emergency service organisations are likely to face in the coming decade. Further information about Workforce 2030 will be available via the CRC’s Driving Change Future Workforce theme at www.bnhcrc.com.au/driving-change/future-workforce.

FURTHER READING

Kragt D, Luksyte A, Dunlop P, Holtrop D & Gagné M (2019) Motivations, experiences and emotions: being an SES volunteer, *Hazard Note* 65, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, accessible at www.bnhcrc.com.au/hazardnotes/65.

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Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (2018) Volunteerism strategy: growing QFES together, *Response* magazine, 21, pp.4, accessible at www.qfes.qld.gov.au/about/Documents/Response%20Mag/Response-Mag-Edition-21.pdf.

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Hazard Notes are prepared from available research at the time of publication to encourage discussion and debate. The contents of *Hazard Notes* do not necessarily represent the views, policies, practises or positions of any of the individual agencies or organisations who are stakeholders of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

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