Australian emergency services face a range of contemporary challenges, including the ongoing availability and effective utilization of a skilled volunteer workforce. Volunteers are the lifeblood of Australian emergency services and constitute a highly unique workforce that provides an essential public service.

Contemporary trends impacting on emergency services volunteering:
- Growing pressures to balance family/work/social responsibilities and increasing competition for volunteers’ time and commitment.
- Increasing employment and income insecurity and rising demands for occupational mobility and flexibility.
- Increasing demographic heterogeneity and an aging population.
- Growing pressures on traditional member-based bodies to modernise and associated changes in governance, with potential implications for members’ autonomy and sense of identity.
- A generational shift in the patterns of social participation from altruistic/collective to egoistic/reflexive motives, with potential implications for sustained volunteer commitment.
- The ABS 2014 General Social Survey has reported a marked decline in emergency services volunteering.
- Some agencies have experienced an unsustainable level of volunteer turnover with major financial and capability implications.

Valuing Volunteers Study — better understanding the primary motives for emergency services volunteering:
- The research aims to identify the dominant and shared values of the volunteer workforce.
- Values are enduring principles and beliefs that guide and motivate individual and group attitudes and actions.
- Central premises of the research are that values play a pivotal role in the decision to commit to and sustain emergency services volunteering, and that volunteer commitment is conditional on feeling satisfied and valued.
- The study will seek to determine the importance of individual, group and organisational values alignment for volunteer commitment and satisfaction.
- In stage 1 of the study SES volunteers across NSW were invited to complete an anonymous survey that measures individual preferences for 10 basic human values and 4 higher-value clusters.
- Stage 2 will explore how the values preferences revealed by the survey are manifest in the day-to-day work of emergency services volunteers and their degree of alignment with core organisational values.

Research progress and preliminary observations:
- A survey of NSW SES volunteers in late 2015 elicited 522 responses (representing a response rate of 6.5% of an estimated 8000 volunteers).
- The strongest values preferences were benevolence and universalism, components of the cluster of self-transcendence that emphasizes concern for the interests and welfare of others.
- The 3rd strongest values preference was self-direction that represents individual creativity and freedom, possibly reflecting the high level of personal initiative required for such potentially demanding roles.
- Preliminary analysis suggests there are statistically significant (and thus potentially important) differences in values and cluster preferences between males and females and between generations (but not between urban and rural).
- A better understanding of the dynamics and distinct needs of a highly motivated and skilled volunteer workforce should assist emergency services leaders to better align organisational and workforce values, with implications for recruitment, training, management and volunteer commitment.