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

## THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING IN AUSTRALIA

### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This research was conducted as part of the *Out of uniform: building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering* project. The project aims to better engage the potential of volunteering to build disaster resilience in Australian communities.

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### SUMMARY

As our way of life changes, the way we volunteer is changing too, presenting both challenges and opportunities for emergency service organisations. This project has identified four key large-scale forces reshaping the nature of volunteering in the 21st century. These are changing lifestyles and values and the changing nature of work; the impact of new communications technology; greater private sector involvement; and growing government expectations of and intervention in the voluntary sector.

Five key areas of focus have also been identified to best capitalise on emerging



▲ Above: MUD ARMY AND SES VOLUNTEERS WORKING TOGETHER DURING THE 2011 FLOODS IN QUEENSLAND. PHOTO: QUEENSLAND FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES.

opportunities, providing evidence and impetus to shift away from a reliance on traditional, structured volunteering models, to models that are more flexible, adaptive and inclusive of newer and diverse volunteering styles.

Emergency management organisations are aware of this shift in the volunteering

landscape and its impacts, and in some instances are already responding. Findings from this project are being used to address these areas, with change makers at organisational, jurisdictional and national levels driving a shift towards more flexible, adaptive and inclusive volunteering models.

### CONTEXT

Drawing upon international and national volunteering research with a focus on disasters and emergencies, this study identifies key shifts in the volunteering landscape as a whole, and considers the possible implications and opportunities for Australian emergency volunteering.

### BACKGROUND

It is now well accepted that the scale and frequency of natural disasters across the planet will increase because of climate change. There is a growing expectation that volunteers will play greater and, at the same

time, different roles in disaster risk reduction and disaster management in the future.

There is also now more attention being given by the Australian emergency management sector to non-traditional or informal emergency volunteers – people who volunteer without affiliation with the established organisations that have recognised roles in emergency and recovery plans, particularly episodic and spontaneous volunteers (e.g. ANZEMC 2015).

Agency leaders show a variety of attitudes and approaches to non-traditional emergency volunteers – some see them as creating legal and occupational health and safety

risks for the agency, and as distracting the organisation from its core business. Others view them as a basis for surge capacity, a valuable resource and almost always the initial responders. Regardless of how they are viewed by emergency management organisations, such agencies are increasingly concerned with bringing non-traditional volunteers into the formal system.

Key issues of concern for agencies and large non-profits are potential legal liability, health and safety issues, and the lack of agency control over non-affiliated volunteers. Nevertheless, whether agencies are supportive or not, non-traditional

emergency volunteers are playing significant roles in response and recovery, and also in preparation and prevention. Some Australian examples of community-based and volunteer-led groups and initiatives include the Brisbane Mud Army, Tassie Fires We Can Help, Community on Ground Assistance (Victoria), Be Ready Warrandyte (Victoria), and BlazeAid.

## BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

The *Out of Uniform* project has investigated current and emerging issues around volunteering and volunteers responding to disaster events, and the different factors that can influence people's participation in non-traditional emergency volunteering (Whittaker, McLennan and Handmer 2015).

The project has also investigated several case studies of non-traditional volunteering, selected to ensure coverage of different stages of disaster risk management, hazard types and types of non-traditional emergency volunteering. They include community led preparedness (Be Ready Warrandyte, see McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer 2015b), community-led recovery (Community on Ground Assistance in Kinglake, see Whittaker, McLennan and Handmer 2017), spontaneous volunteer management (Volunteering Queensland's Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather, see McLennan, Molloy, Whittaker and Handmer 2016 and McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer 2016), the role of volunteers from faith-based groups in recovery (Pinery fire, South Australia), digital volunteering following 2015's Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, and a review of the national surge capacity for response that occurred for Cyclone Tracy in Darwin (1974).

The research team has brought stakeholders together to help map out risks and benefits of six strategic options for engaging with non-traditional emergency volunteering in response and recovery phases, aiming to support decision-making at a strategic level (McLennan, Kruger and Handmer 2017). This has revealed opportunities for emergency management organisations.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

A study of key shifts in the volunteering landscape and the potential implications for, and responses by, Australian emergency management organisations identified four

## END-USER STATEMENT

This research helps to shift the narrative around emergency volunteering from one of crisis and decline, to one of transformation and opportunity. This is in fact good news as it may be the very shift that we need to drive organisational change. This is where we must focus our energy and efforts; as communities change, so must we. If we don't, we face a very real chance of being left behind, and looking back at what might have been. Twenty years ago, Kodak were market leaders in photography and synonymous with Australian culture; today they barely exist. There must be something we can learn from this about growth and development.

Established emergency management organisations need to adapt and embrace emerging opportunities through more flexible, diverse and inclusive volunteering models and closer partnerships with community groups, businesses, and the not-for-profit sector. This will involve confronting very real challenges and barriers to current organisational structures and cultures, and the desire to often want to do it all ourselves.

Failure to accept and adapt to the changes means running a very real risk of falling behind as new voluntary and community-based organisations pursue their own ways to get involved in disaster management, powered by new technology, start up business models, very clear purpose and smart volunteer value propositions. There is much to learn from this and a joined up approach with these new 'organisations' offers a way to augment our own capacity and possibly achieve better community outcomes.

**- Paul Davis, Manager, Volunteer Development and Change, Emergency Management Victoria**

key large-scale forces of change that are reshaping the nature of volunteering in the 21st century. The major forces and trends driving change in volunteering stem from:

- changing lifestyles and values and the changing nature of work (e.g. work and commuting being more time consuming)
- the impact of new communications technology
- greater private sector involvement
- growing government expectations of, and intervention in, the voluntary sector.

A key factor in the shifting nature of volunteering is the impact of broader societal trends creating time poor and a just-in-time approach to life and work. The result of this is that more volunteers want or need a less ongoing commitment. This has led to a widespread rise in people's preferences for shorter-term, more episodic and project-based volunteering that can fit into busy lifestyles (see McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer 2015a; McLennan *et al* 2016).

The revolution in communication technology has significant implications for the way informal, post-disaster volunteering occurs, and indeed all disaster volunteering. Digital or virtual volunteering means volunteers are not tied to specific times and locations and can operate and support the disaster response and recovery from any place. Social

media and mobile technology are global and can overcome many information and communication barriers that once inhibited informal, as well as formal, responses to disasters. The enormous capacity of the Internet can enable crowdsourcing, and in particular, volunteered geographic information (Haworth 2016). Directly affected locals can provide valuable situational information about the disaster on social media and this has the potential to reach a wide audience. This rich, localised, real-time information can also have significant benefits for emergency management organisations.

The growth of private sector involvement has seen an increase in employee or corporate volunteering that occurs through diverse avenues. However, there is very little research on this type of volunteering in the context of disasters and emergencies. Private sector involvement to date has been predominantly reactive and event-based. Notwithstanding, there is evidence of more enduring private-NGO and public-private partnerships that can promote more ongoing engagement. Such partnerships may also enable greater value from skills-based volunteering where volunteers with specific skills, training and experience are sought out by organisations and matched to specific tasks or projects.

Growing government expectations of, and intervention in, volunteering and



▲ **Above:** VOLUNTEER-LED COMMUNITY GROUPS, SUCH AS BLAZE Aid, WHICH BEGAN AFTER BLACK SATURDAY IN 2009 REPAIRING FENCES DESTROYED BY FIRE, WILL PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN EMERGENCIES IN THE FUTURE. PHOTO: BLAZE Aid.

the voluntary sector is also reshaping the volunteering landscape. Three main factors are influencing this: expectations associated with outsourcing services; bureaucratisation of volunteering and; a shift in public administration philosophy.

In the context of disasters, growing government expectations of volunteers and the voluntary sector is also explicit in the policy shift towards resilience-based strategies that emphasise community resilience, self-reliance, and shared responsibility. There is very little research on the consequences of these changes for emergency volunteering or volunteering more generally. Broadly speaking, the responses of volunteers and voluntary organisations have occurred along two divergent paths: the increased professionalisation of established non-profits and a growth in informal grassroots level groups (McLennan *et al* 2015a).

This provides evidence and impetus for emergency management organisations of the need to shift away from a reliance on traditional, structured volunteering models, where volunteers are formally trained and accredited and stay with an organisation for long-periods, to models that are more flexible, adaptive and inclusive of newer and more diverse volunteering styles. This

will require a loosening up of existing management structures and procedures, and the development of a more diverse range of volunteering pathways and roles, including pathways that involve options for shorter-term, project-based or more casual engagements. Importantly, this may provide much needed additional support and relief for the more traditional, committed and highly-trained volunteers that will continue to form the core volunteer base of many emergency management organisations.

There are five key areas for emergency management organisations to focus on to best capitalise on emerging opportunities. They are: developing more flexible volunteer models; targeted spontaneous volunteer coordination and planning; building capacity to engage digital and digitally-enabled volunteers; building partnerships to support employee and skills-based volunteers and; establishing partnerships with existing community groups for disaster risk reduction.

The study highlights promising activity in each of these areas internationally and where available, in Australia:

- Targeted coordination and planning for informal citizen responses to disaster, including spontaneous

## MODERN VOLUNTEERING

It is now widely recognised that a significant qualitative shift is occurring in the nature of modern volunteering as a result of a broad transformation in the way people live and work in the 21st century. This transformation is associated with a range of factors that include the influences of cultural globalisation, mass media and access to the Internet, as well as an ageing population, changes in household composition, growing wealth and inequality, changes in the nature of community, growing individualism, shifting values and rising aspirations. A key, widely recognised factor is the rising demands and expectations of modern employment, which spurs people's growing preferences for shorter-term volunteering engagements. It is likely that growing mobility and diversity in forms of employment have also changed people's expectations of more diverse and flexible forms of volunteering.

- volunteering (e.g. the Amstelland Safety Region procedures to integrate people's knowledge, skills and capacities with the formal response in the Netherlands; the Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather service by Volunteering Queensland that coordinates and matches spontaneous volunteers with helping organisations).
- Building capacity to engage with digital and digitally-enabled volunteers (e.g. integration experiments conducted in Canada and the United States with digital volunteering groups like Virtual Operations Support Team Canada, and early movements towards establishing a Virtual Operations Support Team network for Australia).
- Establishing partnerships with the private sector to support appropriate employee and skills-based volunteering (e.g. the Ready When the Time Comes corporate volunteer training program of the American Red Cross).
- The co-production of community-based disaster risk reduction with existing, well-established community groups (e.g. Be Ready Warrandyte in Victoria).

## HOW IS THIS RESEARCH BEING USED?

There is mounting leadership support across Australian emergency management for the types of changes indicated by this research.

This is reflected in recent organisational and sector-wide volunteer strategies. In this context, this research is supporting the change makers that are driving this shift. It provides firm evidence of the need for change and the potential benefits of non-traditional emergency volunteering, identifies key areas of opportunity for emergency management organisations to pursue, and highlights best practice examples from across Australia and overseas.

The research has influenced key national initiatives, with findings used extensively for the development of the National Spontaneous Volunteer Strategy by the Australia and New Zealand Emergency Management Committee (ANZEMC 2015). The strategy provides advice to emergency service agencies on best practice principles, as well as what they need to be aware of, and what they need to consider and plan for when working with spontaneous volunteers. Important issues such as legal obligations and social media are also covered, with the work of the project team integral to the strategy's content.

Building on this, the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience is drawing directly on the research to develop a new handbook on spontaneous volunteer management. The handbook will provide important guidance for organisations on how to incorporate the principles of the National Spontaneous Volunteer Strategy, and the most recent research on spontaneous volunteering, into their own plans and procedures.

The research is also impacting the development of new strategies in volunteer management at the organisational level, for example informing new directions and developments in the Department of Fire and Emergency

## FURTHER READING

ANZEMC (2015), National Spontaneous Volunteer Strategy: Coordination of volunteer effort in the immediate post disaster stage, Australia - New Zealand Emergency Management Committee.

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Whittaker J, McLennan B, Handmer J (2017), Community On Ground Assistance, Kinglake: a study, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

Services Western Australia and the New South Wales SES. Recent movement in the NSW SES towards trialling a new flexible volunteering strategy, based on research undertaken in this project, is particularly notable and warrants close attention from researchers and volunteer managers. The new strategy aims to encourage greater community participation in emergency services volunteering, increase the diversity of the NSW SES volunteer workforce and strengthen the resilience of local communities. The strategy outlines a wider range of volunteering roles and pathways for NSW SES that reflect the changing landscape of volunteering, including spontaneous volunteering, corporate partnerships and a new Community Action Team pathway.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There is fast growing awareness of the impacts of the shifting volunteering landscape, and of the need for emergency management organisations and the sector as a whole to respond. A key area of research needed to support the capacity to do this concerns the question of how traditionally command and control based organisations can foster the internal cultural change required to embrace less traditional styles of volunteering. Exploring this change collaboratively with end-users will be a key focus of volunteering research currently in planning by RMIT University and the University of Western Australia for the next stage of the CRC.

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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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