

VALUING VOLUNTEERS STUDY



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Volunteers are the **lifeblood** of Australian emergency services and constitute a **unique skilled workforce** that provides an **essential public service**

A number of emergency services have experienced annual **volunteer turnover** exceeding 20%, with **major financial and capability implications**

Research questions

- The research is seeking to better understand the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, and to determine what role the alignment of individual, unit and corporate values plays in volunteer satisfaction and turnover
- 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 volunteering, and that ongoing volunteer commitment is conditional on feeling valued
- The research so far has involved anonymous surveys of the values preferences of volunteers in the NSW and SA State Emergency Services
- Further face-to-face consultations are underway with particular NSW SES units to explore how the individual need for autonomy and independence is expressed and accommodated within a command and control culture

Research findings

- The values surveys affirmed the importance of altruistic values as primary motives for emergency services volunteering
- The surveys also highlighted the strength of the value of self-direction (personal autonomy and independence)
- The surveys revealed statistically significant differences in values preferences by gender and generation (but not location), with important implications for how different volunteer sub-groups are managed
- The research has exposed the sensitive and qualified nature of the volunteer's relationship with the unit and agency, and the importance of nurturing goodwill to maintain volunteer commitment
- Evolving social values and the demands of modern life are challenging traditional forms of altruistic civic engagement, necessitating more flexible and innovative ways to engage with a dynamic and diverse workforce into the future

Research utilisation

- A better understanding of the distinct and changing needs of a highly motivated and skilled volunteer workforce should assist emergency services leaders to better align organisational and workforce values, with strategic implications for recruitment, training, management and volunteer commitment
- The results from this research will be provided to the NSW State Emergency Service who are working towards developing a flexible volunteering strategy, and the Valuing Volunteers Study may be used to inform that strategy
- The methodological contribution of this research will include a values audit package that can be used by emergency services to assess the evolving values priorities of their volunteer workforces

