



EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING 2030: A SECTOR-WIDE, MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

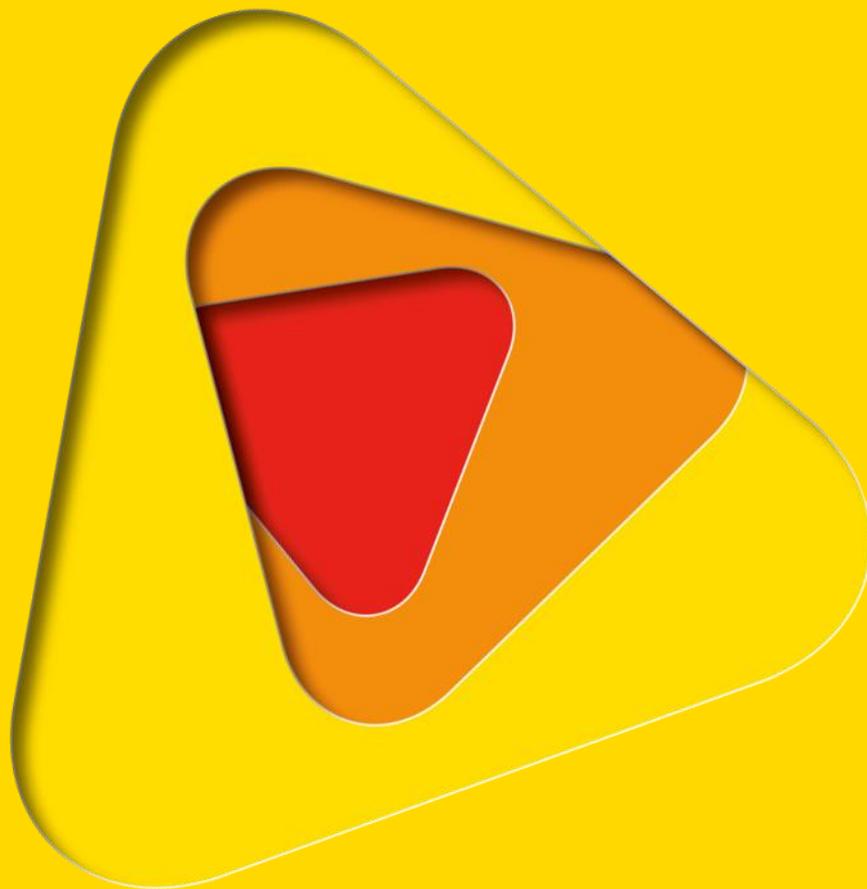
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ABSTRACT

EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING 2030: A SECTOR-WIDE, MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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What is emergency volunteering going to look like in 2030? How (and by whom) is it going to be organised? How can the emergency management sector best enable the value of this volunteering for communities - before, during and after emergencies? Researchers at RMIT University are seeking answers to these questions in a three-year project for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

This presentation shares insights from the first stage of this project. It provides a sector-wide, management perspective on what the sector most needs to do to adapt to the future of volunteering. It is based on interviews with 27 managers in volunteerism from across Australian government and non-government emergency management organisations (EMOs).

Volunteerism managers paint a strong picture of the preferred future as being one where volunteering and management approaches are more flexible and adaptive to the needs of both communities and volunteers, where EMOs have stronger cultures of volunteerism, and where the sector is far more outward-looking and collaborative in its service delivery than it is today. While past research on the sustainability of emergency volunteering has mostly focused on activity at the level of specific management practices, volunteerism managers earmark changes needed at organisational and sector levels. These changes even extend into potential redesign of the ways in which emergency management services are provided to communities in different settings, as well as who is involved in providing them.



INTRODUCTION

What is emergency volunteering going to look like in 2030? How (and by whom) is it going to be organised? How can the emergency management sector best enable the value of this volunteering for communities - before, during and after emergencies? Researchers at RMIT University are seeking answers to these questions in a three-year project for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

This paper summarises insights from the first stage of this project. It provides a sector-wide, management perspective on what the sector most needs to do to adapt to the future of volunteering. It is based on interviews with 27 managers in volunteerism from across Australian state government and non-government emergency management organisations (EMOs). Quotes from interviews used in this report have been de-identified and are referred to with a unique ID number preceded by either GV (governmental EMO) or NG (non-governmental EMO).

VIEWS FROM VOLUNTEERISM MANAGERS

WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE OVER THE LAST 5-10 YEARS?

When asked what has changed in the last five to ten years in emergency volunteering, managers painted a picture of a sector that has become more rigid, regulated and slow-to-change while the external environment has become more dynamic, empowered, and fast-paced:

One of the challenges I was just talking about then is the bureaucracy, because there will come a point where, and we experience that now, where emergent forms of volunteering go against the government and the risk averse attitude we have. We don't want to take risks. We like doing things slowly and we have got to change. We have got to move more quickly if we want to remain the leading people who respond to storm and flood and bushfires and everything else the sector does (GV2).

Regarding the internal environment within the emergency management sector, managers described increasing professionalisation combined with growing government regulation of volunteering, as well as mounting administrative and training burdens on affiliated emergency volunteers. They also referred to organisational restructures that have occurred, and increases in capacity in volunteer management in recent years, particularly at more strategic levels.

Regarding changes in the external environment, all managers referred to changes in the way people volunteer and the growth of shorter-term and more informal volunteering. Many, particularly government managers, also described changes in communities that impact on volunteering, particularly urbanization, rural decline and depopulation, increased mobility of people, and greater diversity within and between communities. Another external change emphasised by government managers in particular, was increasing governmental and societal expectations of, and demands on, volunteers and emergency management organisations.



WHAT ARE THE KEY VOLUNTEERING ISSUES THE SECTOR IS CURRENTLY FACING?

There was unanimous agreement amongst managers that the key volunteering issue the sector currently faces is volunteer sustainability in the face of the changing landscape of volunteering. Addressing the implications of the rise of spontaneous volunteering was a second challenge highlighted by many managers.

Managers revealed several layers to the volunteer sustainability challenge (see Table 1). These included the well-known recruitment and retention challenges, but they also reached more deeply into the nature of volunteer management models, the ways that emergency management services are designed and delivered, relationships between the sector and the communities it serves, and culture in emergency service agencies and across the sector.

Layers within the volunteer sustainability challenge	Example quotes
Recruitment and retention practices are out-of-date	<i>Our issues are the standard ones about - how do we maintain and sustain our volunteer workforce, given we can't pay them? What roles do we need them to perform? How do we match the expectations of people wanting to volunteer with the kind of roles we have available? How do we maintain motivation and commitment over time (GV1)?</i>
Organisational volunteer models are too rigid and narrow	<i>I think if we continue our old way of thinking that volunteers sign up for life, we are not going to survive [...] Our current way of doing it is not sustainable (NG1).</i>
A culture of volunteerism is not well-embedded in emergency service agencies	<i>You walk around the organisation, and not with all people, but you'll hear things like "oh, volunteers are really difficult to work with. You can't engage them. They're not interested." There's a mythology which turns into attitude which is reflected in behaviour around volunteers and what they are (GV9).</i>
Service delivery models are overly bureaucratic and inward-looking	<i>The fundamentals of the business [are not working] as in how do we do what we do with what we're actually provided to do that work? How do we use the resources? How do we use the fire services? How do we actually apply that in the smartest way, the most innovative way, but particularly, most importantly, that meets the end users' needs (GV8)?</i>
Organisations are not well-connected to their communities	<i>When we've got an organisation now where volunteers are openly admitting they've got no connection with their community, many do but there are many that don't, then you need to look at that and go, "well, what are we doing here and why are we existing as an organisation?" (GV12)</i>
The command-and-control culture of the sector is exclusionary	<i>Culture [is the biggest challenge for volunteer sustainability moving forward]; changing the emergency service organisation culture to be inclusive and collaborative (GV11).</i>

TABLE 1: THE MULTIPLE LAYERS OF THE VOLUNTEER SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE RAISED BY VOLUNTEERISM MANAGERS



WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

Two key activities currently happening at the level of management practices to address these issues were:

- Implementing youth and diversity programs, particularly those targeting recruitment of young people, women and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (e.g. CFS cadet program, NT PFES communications translated into local indigenous languages); and
- Improving mechanisms for volunteer engagement and training, particularly through the introduction of new technology (e.g. DFES and St John Ambulance WA volunteer portals), and streamlining volunteer induction and training (ACT ESA's Recruit Colleges).

At the organisational level, a number of organisations are developing and trialing new volunteer models focused on greater flexibility and diversity in volunteering roles (e.g. NSW SES Volunteering Reimagined Strategy, CFA Flexible Volunteering Pilot, QFES Volunteerism Strategy, DFES On-boarding Project with UWA, St John Ambulance Vic Community Transport Program).

Three areas of sectoral level activity emphasised by managers were:

- Planning and collaborating for the coordination of spontaneous volunteering (e.g. with volunteering peak bodies);
- Integrated delivery of services, particularly in less densely populated and smaller jurisdictions (e.g. SAFECOM integrating youth programs with St John Ambulance and Scouts, WA Volunteer Fire and Emergency Services, Ambulance Victoria/St John Ambulance MOU), and;
- Sharing learning and undertaking research (e.g. EMV 3Vs project, AFAC groups, DFES-UWA projects, informal exchange of information and learning).



WHAT DOES THE PREFERRED FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Questions about potential and preferred futures are difficult to answer as they require thinking beyond current experiences, contexts and structures. Notwithstanding, as Box 1 shows, managers painted a strong picture of a future where volunteering and management approaches are more flexible and adaptive to the needs of both communities and volunteers, where EMOs have stronger cultures of volunteerism, and where the sector is far more outward-looking and collaborative than it is today.

Notably, there was strong consistency amongst the elements that managers prioritised for the future. One point of difference, however, was the extent to which they emphasised the importance of regulating versus enabling community-based and emergent (i.e. spontaneous) volunteering that is not affiliated with EMOs.

Formal volunteering and volunteer management practice

- Flexible, lower-commitment, & life-cycle volunteering opportunities exist.
- Volunteers come from all segments of society, and volunteering is appealing and accessible to a wide range of people.
- It is easy for people to become a volunteer, get fit-for-purpose training, and continue to volunteer.

Organisational culture & structures

- Community-based & emergent volunteering is supported & (digitally) enabled by EMOs to co-deliver EM services.
- Volunteers are supported and empowered by EMOs to connect with their communities.
- Volunteers and volunteer management are valued and appropriately resourced, and a culture of volunteerism is embedded across EMOs.

The sector and its relationship with communities

- There is deep collaboration across the sector that enables more coordinated, integrated, and efficient service delivery.
- Service delivery is adaptive to, and directly shaped by, community risks, needs and priorities.
- The emergency management sector is agile, forward-looking, open and externally-focused.
- Emergency management services are collaboratively delivered with communities and the organisations that support them.

BOX 1: A PICTURE OF THE PREFERRED FUTURE PAINTED BY VOLUNTEERISM MANAGERS

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN TO MOVE TOWARDS THIS FUTURE?

Managers identified numerous priorities for what needs to happen to move the sector towards this preferred future for volunteering. A selection of key priorities identified are described in tables below. While some of these sat at the level of volunteer management practices to improve recruitment and retention (Table 2), many involved organisational (Table 3) and sector level change (Table 4).

Formal volunteering & volunteer management practice	Example quotes
Continue to increase mobility, diversity and flexibility in formal volunteering	<i>As more and more people move into like city centres and may lose some of that geographic communities and as their idea of a community starts to change and our appreciation that people's communities are not just about who their neighbour is but who they see on a regular basis. And that we have to be responsive to that, we have to see how we can adapt our model and what we can offer volunteers to ensure that it meets their needs and meets their motivations (NG13).</i>
Engage volunteers deeply in solving problems and designing solutions	<i>"In terms of day-to-day, I don't care what anyone says, the future of the organisation depends on putting frameworks in place to allow our staff to get out and talk to the volunteers. If they can't get out and openly engage and problem-solve with the volunteers on the ground then we will continue to have the problems we've always had (GV12).</i>
Streamline, target and tailor recruitment, training, and deployment of volunteers, including greater recognition of prior skills	<i>[Our organisation] has said that they would like to have in place, and it exists in other countries, that we are able to on-board a volunteer in 10 minutes. That is what should be happening in 2030. And that would mean we could be very proactive and by 2030 we would be far more sophisticated in acknowledging pre-existing skill sets (NG1).</i>

TABLE 2: KEY MANAGEMENT PRACTICE PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE IDENTIFIED

Organisational culture and structures	
Adequately resource and staff volunteer management and support	<i>[Volunteer sustainability] has never really been looked at in the [organisation] apart from it has been someone's side job to do. But now every rock I lift up there is work here, and there is more work to do there, and there is just so much work to do in the different spaces and not enough people to do it (GV2).</i>
Carefully, sensitively and actively manage cultural change	<i>...then you need to, through a comprehensive engagement program, analyse and put in ways to mitigate or reduce resistance to cultural change, which will be required to ensure that change can run as smoothly as possible (GV12).</i>
Develop mechanisms to engage and coordinate with new volunteer-led groups and emergent volunteering	<i>We are trying to engage with people when they spring up following an emergency; to talk with them, to work with them, to let them know what we do and help them and they can help us, rather than see them as competition (NG2).</i>
Build deeper relationships with corporates and the private sector	<i>"I really see volunteering as a very opportune gateway for [...] people to get corporates involved with the organisations (NG5).</i>

TABLE 3: KEY ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE IDENTIFIED



The sector and its relationship with communities	
Build a strong evidence base for the value of volunteering and of what works in adapting to the changing landscape	<i>The stories that are based on evidence-based outcomes are going to be the ones that are going to sell in future. We need to be able to: one, better understand where those potential good stories are, and then two, actively do those pilots or programs to demonstrate that they will work (GV12).</i>
Implement mechanisms to better understand community risk, needs and priorities	<i>It's very simple to say community-centred, community-focused. I'd prefer to actually get a bit more descriptive about what that is. It's about understanding that all community, it has a whole lot of people in there that are end users that have specific needs (G8).</i>
Implement more integrated and locally-tailored service delivery in collaboration with communities, particularly in rural & remote areas	<i>To make it [the preferred future] happen, a pragmatic conversation on: What are the risks in community? What are the risks in rural areas? And what are the resources required to meet these risks? And then work as one to break down the organisational barriers to achieve this (GV3).</i>

TABLE 4: KEY SECTOR LEVEL PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE IDENTIFIED

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Past research on the sustainability of emergency volunteering has mostly focused on activity at the level of specific management practices. By contrast, the picture painted by volunteerism managers reveals that ensuring volunteer sustainability and enabling the value of volunteering for communities into the future is likely to involve organisational and sector level changes. The changes earmarked even extend into potential redesign of the ways in which emergency management services are provided to communities in different settings, as well as who is involved in providing them.

In the next stages of this project, researchers will bring together the views of volunteerism managers with local government managers, community engagement managers, volunteer leaders, and community and voluntary sector organisations. The combined findings will be presented to an expert panel to distil and identify key themes and priorities to inform and enrich decision-making about what is an uncertain and contested, but fast-approaching, future for emergency volunteering and volunteer management.