

**The Attraction, Support and Retention
of
Emergency Management Volunteers**

Executive Summary

Prepared by Judy Esmond, Ph.D.

<http://www.morevolunteers.com>

REPORT ON THE ATTRACTION, SUPPORT AND RETENTION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT VOLUNTEERS

Executive Summary

The Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management (MCPPEM) has identified that action needs to be undertaken to ensure the future viability of the vital work undertaken by emergency management volunteers in the areas of both response and recovery in dealing with disasters and emergencies in this country.

The Attorney-General's Department through Emergency Management Australia (EMA) has undertaken this task and the commissioning of this report by Dr Judy Esmond, aimed at identifying issues and options for the attraction, support and retention of emergency management volunteers, is an important part of this process.

The research methodology in this report involved several processes: (i) the examination of relevant literature and use of the researcher's own knowledge and expertise; (ii) extensive interviews with members of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF) and suggested others producing an interim report; and (iii) written feedback to the interim report from members of the AEMC and their representatives.

The findings identified five major areas of challenge that must be addressed to ensure the sustainability of and growth in emergency management volunteers. The five challenges are **time, training, cost, recognition and people**.

Challenge One: Time

With the ever increasing busyness of people's lives, a 'time strapped' population is reconsidering the amount and length of time they may commit to volunteering. Traditional long-serving volunteers are being replaced by 'time sensitive' volunteers who are 'weighing up' the amount of time required to volunteer with other competing demands in their lives. The development of different levels of volunteer involvement and therefore time commitment, as well as different types of volunteering

opportunities, are now a necessity for organizations hoping to attract and retain volunteers.

Challenge Two: Training

Community, political and organisational expectations, as well as litigious considerations, have all contributed to the increasing importance and amount of volunteer time spent in extensive accredited training programs, particularly in response based organisations. Accredited training has brought with it many benefits but these must be balanced with the needs of increasingly 'time strapped' volunteers. The continued development of different levels of volunteer involvement and therefore training, as well as different delivery modes, must aim to ensure that training is always relevant, interesting, well-presented and time effective.

Challenge Three: Cost

Volunteering activity costs money as well as time, and volunteers have often absorbed these financial costs. But the current economic circumstances, fluctuating petrol prices and recent research into the actual costs of volunteering have all highlighted that these costs can be considerable. Action is needed to provide for the proper resourcing of volunteers and the adoption of an equitable reimbursement option for out-of-pocket expenses for all emergency management volunteers in both response and recovery based organisations.

Challenge Four: Recognition

Being appreciated and not taken for granted are essential to volunteer retention. Recognition of volunteers by: state and national leaders; the organisations they serve; their own local unit; and the general public all contribute to volunteers feeling that they are valued. Traditional forms of recognition through the awarding of long service medals must now be augmented with the development of other creative ways of recognising volunteers and increasing public awareness of the significant contribution made by all emergency management volunteers in the areas of response and recovery to emergencies and disasters throughout this country.

Challenge Five: People

Crucial to the personal volunteering experience are the people with whom volunteers engage at the local level – their fellow volunteers. Integral to this experience and the development of a well-run unit or group are those in leadership roles. The need for the development and provision of effective leadership and people management skills training and coaching through a variety of delivery modes is therefore imperative for all those undertaking such leadership roles. The long term sustainability at the local level requires effective leadership and the ability to welcome and engage others from more diverse backgrounds. Specific programs that involve creative ‘targeted’ strategies to attract a greater diversity of people such as more women in response based organisations, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse groups, are needed.

Overall, this research has identified five main areas of challenge. The following recommendations highlight some of the options for the future attraction, support and retention of emergency management volunteers for these five areas of challenge.

Recommendations

Project Team Recommendation

That a project team be established to develop and trial a range of innovative strategies highlighted in this report. These strategies should be undertaken as locally based initiatives across different States and in different locations. These will provide evidence-based case studies for others through ‘trial and error’ on the most effective methods to attract, support and retain emergency management volunteers.

The project team should comprise of seconded paid representatives in both the response and recovery area who work closely with volunteers and who are innovative and responsive to testing new and different methods. The project team should also include the services of outside consultants with independent expertise and knowledge in the recruitment and retention of volunteers and also internet marketing and technology based learning initiatives.

The project team can be a combined initiative of both the Commonwealth and State governments overseen through EMA.

The project team would trial and implement, with selected local units or groups, initiatives across the five main areas of challenge including the development of:

- different levels of volunteer involvement and time commitment
- other types of volunteering roles and tasks
- other forms of volunteering, e.g., family and corporate volunteering
- technology based learning tools to supplement other training
- a range of locally based volunteer recognition strategies
- targeted recruitment and retention campaigns for particular groups, e.g., women

It is this project team, in association with the work undertaken by organisations themselves, which will translate much of the research in this report into action in the attraction, support and retention of emergency management volunteers.

Specific Recommendations

The following are specific recommendations from this report pertaining to each of the five main areas of challenge:

Time

That organisations be aware of the need to be ‘time sensitive’ in all activities, tasks and duties they ask of their emergency management volunteers.

That consideration be given to the implementation of different levels of volunteer involvement and therefore different levels of time commitment for emergency management volunteers, particularly in response based organisations.

That consideration be given to the development of different roles and a variety of different and creative ways to engage potential volunteers, e.g., families, corporations and fly in/fly out employees.

Training

That support is given to the completion of the current review of the Public Safety Training Package and therefore the re-examination of volunteer training requirements.

That consideration be given to the provision of more quality specialist trainers and to explore different types of technology based tools to supplement and enhance the training for emergency management volunteers.

Cost

That a short-term taskforce is established to build upon the work already completed by a previous taskforce, to decide on suitable options for the equitable reimbursement of response and recovery based volunteers for reasonable out-of-pocket expenses and other costs associated with their voluntary work.

That a further form of financial assistance is also made available to all emergency management volunteers when involved in more prolonged and protracted operations dealing with disasters and emergencies.

That consideration and commitment be given to the proper resourcing of all emergency management volunteers, in both response and recovery based organisations, to effectively perform their volunteering duties.

Recognition

That National and State leaders ensure that all emergency management volunteers involved in both response and recovery are recognised and thanked, both at times of emergencies and also on other occasions.

That consideration be given to an equality for all emergency management volunteers in eligibility to receive the National Medal.

That consideration be given to development of a range of recognition strategies, beyond long service medals, at the organisational and local level to acknowledge and value the contribution made by emergency management volunteers.

People

That leadership training be developed for all volunteer leaders based on models that provide on-going training and coaching opportunities.

That organisational processes and procedures are continually monitored to support and assist the work undertaken by volunteers including the provision of administrative support as required at the local level.

That consideration be given to the development of targeted strategies to engage more members of specific groups including local indigenous groups and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups.

Research

That consideration be given to a range of research projects to examine further these five areas of challenge. For example, that research be undertaken into the unexplored area of 'initial interest prospects': the large numbers of prospective volunteers who show an interest in becoming volunteers and after making contact, never return to become volunteers.

Conclusion

The adoption of this report and its recommendations will contribute to addressing the five main areas of challenge and enhancing the sustainability and growth in the attraction, support and retention of emergency management volunteers into the future.