

Building resilience to climate change: the role of volunteers

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In the face intensifying extreme weather events and changing climate, it is more urgent than ever to make sure emergency management sectors are equipped and effective. Addressing the key issues facing the volunteer workforce will be essential to strengthen the resilience to climate change.

In Australia, the Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements (2020)¹ found that ‘supporting and sustaining an effective volunteer workforce is vital’ to provide future capabilities of fire and emergency services to respond to natural hazards. Volunteers make up the majority of the fire and emergency services workforce in Australia. Over one million volunteers support Australia’s crisis resilience and, of those, more than 400,000 work directly in emergency response and relief.²

According to the 2020 Report on Government Services, volunteers make up 90% of the firefighting and emergency services workforce across Australia.³ Volunteers are the core responders for rural areas and provide the surge capacity needed to respond to large or concurrent events. The need for volunteers will only grow as Australia faces increasing extreme weather events in a changing climate.

Climate change and emergency management

Building resilience to climate change risks and effects remains an urgent and significant challenge for the emergency management sector.⁴ AFAC, the National Council for fire and emergency services in Australia and New Zealand, released a revised discussion paper and national position on climate change for the sector.⁵ Many of the climate risks and consequences for the fire and emergency service that were identified put additional demand and pressure on the volunteer (and paid) fire emergency services workforce. These included:

- changes in the frequency, severity and complexity of extreme weather and cascading events

- increasing pressure on resourcing, responders and capabilities due to the increased frequency and intensity of incidents
- increasing health and safety risks for staff and volunteers, including dealing with new technologies, as well as fatigue and mental health issues.

According to Department of Fire and Emergency Services:⁶

It is certain climate change will alter the frequency, intensity, spatial duration and timing of extreme weather and climate extremes, with impacts certainly worsened with an increase in compound events that will exacerbate effects of natural hazards. (p.2)

As extreme events increase, so will the demands on full-time and volunteer emergency service workers and agencies. There will be requirements for larger numbers of staff and volunteers to be involved in emergency response activities for prolonged periods, at increased frequencies, and responding to more extreme events. This will result in greater strains on emergency management organisations, volunteers and communities.

Volunteer workforce supply issues

Despite increasing demand for emergency service volunteers, they are becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain. Volunteering rates in Australia have been steadily declining over the past 15 years, and the problem was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions and

lockdowns that followed. The percentage of people in Australia who volunteered for an organisation or group in 2020 (25%) was lower than in 2019 (30%) and also the lowest rate ever recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.⁷ The number of volunteers in emergency services organisations has also steadily decreased since 2015–16⁸ and volunteer emergency services organisations face the additional struggles of high turnover rates and an ageing volunteer workforce.

Need for evidence-based solutions

Australia's future capacity to respond to and recover from intensifying natural hazards, emergencies and a changing climate is at risk. Evidence-based solutions are urgently needed to reverse the declining volunteer workforce and ensure that emergency management sectors are adequately equipped to face the risks and effects of climate change. Such solutions required a clear understanding of the reasons underlying volunteer turnover. A Volunteering Australia research report summarised what is currently known about turnover in volunteer organisations and what factors are most important for retaining volunteer workers.⁷ Some examples of evidence-based actions to reverse the decline in volunteering include:

- Enhancing support from paid staff and supervisors – allocate resources to train and develop leaders, whether they are paid staff or volunteers. The training should specifically target interpersonal skills, emphasising effective support and communication with volunteers. This focus will help build strong, supportive relationships with the volunteers, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of their volunteer experiences within the emergency services.
- Enabling greater autonomy – where possible, emergency services organisations should empower volunteers and give them freedom to make decisions, have choices, provide input and to have some level of control in how they carry out their tasks and activities.
- Helping volunteers contribute – design volunteering tasks to be stimulating and clearly related to the organisation's purpose. This may involve reducing the amount of time volunteers 'sit around' waiting to contribute.
- Addressing burnout – regularly check in with volunteers to check they have sufficient social, cognitive and physical resources to cope with the demands of their work. Increase mental health and wellbeing support for volunteers.

Strategies that address volunteer workforce planning and volunteer management practices will be vital to ensure the future sustainability of Australia's fire and emergency management organisations. To address the decline in volunteering and ensure the future sustainability of the emergency management sector, it is crucial to implement effective workforce planning and improve the quality of the volunteering experience through effective volunteer management practices.

Volunteers are the backbone of our fire and emergency services workforces. Volunteers are the cornerstone of sustainable and resilient communities that can absorb, recover from, and adapt to hazards and environmental emergencies resulting from a changing climate. Supporting and sustaining emergency volunteer workforces has never been more urgent, nor important.

Endnotes

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