

Managing change within the emergency services to ensure the long-term viability of volunteerism

Context

Securing a long-term future in the current climate of social and economic change is one of the most significant challenges confronting volunteer-based emergency service and support agencies in Australia and around the world.

Factors such as population growth, rural and urban mobility, and increasing cultural diversity present challenges to service providers. These factors increase the demands for, and the complexities of, service delivery by volunteers, and create complex management issues.

The significance of these challenges, and the need for strategies to assist emergency services across Australia in managing them effectively, has been widely recognised in recent years, both in terms of the critical role played by volunteers, and in terms of the extent to which the volunteer culture is under threat.

There is now general acceptance that best management practices, standards and guidelines need to be developed, to assist emergency services across Australia in their effort to support the current and future generation of volunteers. Thus, the pursuit of best management practices has become a key agenda item both for specific agencies and the emergency services sector as a whole.

The CFA Volunteer Research and Development Project

In May 1996, CFA commenced a project to investigate a range of key questions concerning the current status of volunteering and ways of enhancing the viability of the volunteer culture within the organisation and the broader community.

Following its establishment, a component of CFA's research and development project took on a national focus with the assistance of a \$10,000 grant from EMA.

The broad aims of the CFA's project were to:

- enhance the existing volunteer culture within the emergency services
- develop methods of planning and

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management that will minimise the risks created by issues and changes that affect volunteers and maximise volunteer participation and satisfaction over the long term.

In a broad sense, the project comprised four key components:

- an analysis of socio-economic trends and demographic data on CFA Areas in order to develop a better understanding of the external environment in which the CFA operates
- a review of local and international literature on volunteering to see the extent to which there is recognition of these issues and trends and what adaptive responses are evident
- the conduct of a broad-based internal assessment of issues affecting volunteers in the CFA in an attempt to develop a better understanding of volunteers' opinions about volunteering and how it impacts on their lives, work, family, etc.
- an Australia-wide review of volunteer development and coordination initiatives and practices in other volunteer-based emergency services, as a basis for developing generic guidelines for best practice volunteer management and support in the emergency services.

The challenges posed by socio-economic and demographic change

A number of key socio-economic trends have been identified as likely to have an impact on Australian volunteer-based emergency service organisations in the future.

Key population trends

- Mobile and volatile population distribution
- Rapid population growth in suburban areas, tourist centres and coastal areas
- Many rural areas are experiencing

periods of population decline

Implications of population trends for the emergency services

There is little doubt that, in the years ahead, fluctuating population distribution and high levels of mobility and volatility will increasingly challenge traditional modes of service delivery.

The number and complexity of risks is generally greater in areas where the population density is higher, so that, in areas where the population is increasing rapidly, so too is the risk of an emergency, and the challenge of providing emergency services.

In such areas it is likely that there will be an increasing demand for an efficient and effective service. However, ensuring that the volunteer base expands at a rate corresponding with population growth may be difficult in areas where new residents have a limited understanding of their local community or of the volunteer culture within the emergency services.

On the other hand it is possible that these groups may view volunteering as a positive way in which to become involved in activities of the local community.

High population mobility will also undoubtedly pose a number of challenges for the emergency services. It is likely that the ability of organisations to maintain the traditional nature of geographically fixed volunteer membership may become more difficult. It may also result in a decline in the number of people who are able to make a long-term commitment to volunteering.

It is possible that in the future, high population mobility and volatility will also challenge the notion of the volunteer base as a permanent fixture, or the point from which services are delivered.

Key economic and industry trends

- Pressure on rural communities from regional restructuring and rationalisation of services
- Economic change as a result of government policy on deregulation and competition.

Implications of economic changes for the emergency services

Volunteer-based organisations need to recognise that many of the factors contributing to the hardship of current conditions are not temporary aberrations but represent fundamental changes. Thus, strategic thinking which takes into account current conditions and prospects is integral to ensuring long-term organisational viability.

In the current climate of economic rationalisation it is likely that maintaining standards of service in areas experiencing rapid population decline will become scrutinised more heavily. Fundamentally, organisations will need to consider how they might continue to provide an efficient volunteer-based emergency service to people who remain in areas where the population is declining and where there is little infrastructure remaining to support familiar community networks.

The pressures of a competitive economic climate will also undoubtedly become more widespread within the community over time. These will continue to increase competition within and between industries and consequently limit both employees' and employers' ability to participate in voluntary work (i.e. because of the costs associated with reduced productivity).

Advances in technology are likely to have significant implications for volunteer-based emergency services as equipment becomes more sophisticated and is up-dated at more regular intervals. It is likely that formal training programs will need to be expanded to ensure volunteers keep abreast of rapid technological innovation. Organisations may also need to carefully monitor whether volunteers leave the organisation in response to such change.

Regional restructuring, and subsequent localised population decline, will increasingly reduce the number of people available to participate in voluntary activities in remote rural areas. In addition, many of those who remain will be forced to travel to regional centres for employment and educational opportunities, so that the number of volunteers with the ability to respond rapidly to emergencies, especially during the day, will also be considerably fewer.

In the past, emergency service volunteers were predominantly employed in the 'blue collar' rather than the 'white collar' sectors. However, as Australia's economic reliance on the primary-based industry sectors continues to decline, the

emergency services may need to explore options for encouraging the involvement of more people from non-traditional sources in their voluntary activities.

Key labour market participation trends

- More post-secondary qualifications are being attained
- Increasing numbers of women participating in the paid labour force
- People in full-time employment working longer hours
- Rising unemployment levels

Implications of labour market changes for the emergency services

In recent years, there have been a number of changes in the nature and structure of paid work. Among the most prominent of these changes are rising unemployment levels and the re-distribution of employment opportunities.

With high unemployment levels particularly prevalent amongst low-skill groups, some commentators have suggested that these people may find meaningful activity and acquire skills through voluntary work (Curtis & Noble 1990; Rogers 1992). However, it is also recognised that volunteer work cannot fully meet the need and desire for full-time work that the unemployed seek. As such, the unemployed are likely to be a group which could view volunteering as a means of gaining skills and experience and, in doing so, improve their job prospects. Thus, unemployed people may well represent a resource base from which volunteers with a short-term, rather than long-term, commitment can be drawn.

In contrast, as the hours worked by those people who are highly skilled increase, it is likely that their availability to participate in extra-curricular activities and volunteering will decrease. Furthermore, this group of people may also be more geographically mobile which could limit their degree of involvement in, and commitment to, any one community and their voluntary activities.

Key social trends

- Growing numbers of single parent families
- An ageing population
- Increased ethnic diversity

Implications of social trends for the emergency services

It is widely recognised that the social fabric of the Australian community is rapidly changing. In many instances this is coupled with, or is the result of, a range of other global conditions. It is displayed most prominently in the make-up of

family units, the age structure of the population, and the representation of an increasing diversity of ethnic populations. So that, communities are becoming much more complex and volunteers are now serving a greater range of customers.

The increasing number of single-parent family units is likely to have ramifications for the emergency services. Clearly, organisations will need to address and demonstrate how volunteering in the emergency services could become a more viable activity and more attractive for these people.

The changing age structure and composition of the community is also likely to alter the delivery of volunteer-based emergency services. The impact of a large group reaching retirement age (and, increasingly, taking early retirement) is important as it may form a large pool of people seeking new opportunities for community involvement.

On the other hand, it is likely that there will also be fewer young people available for recruitment than in the past. In addition, those younger people who are available will probably encounter a range of economic challenges that will reduce their tendency to become volunteers. It is likely that those who are highly educated and skilled will be in increasing demand and working longer hours in the paid labour force, whereas those with limited skills may join a large, and growing, group of unemployed people within the community (McKenzie 1997a).

Increasing immigration rates will also pose a number of challenges for the emergency services, particularly those operating in the urban growth corridors. Among a range of other issues, people immigrating from other countries are not likely to have an understanding of the Australian environment and the conditions which are likely to expose communities to the risks of an emergency, or the volunteer culture, role and nature of Australian emergency services.

Thus, without careful consideration, the challenge of providing an effective volunteer-based emergency service to an increasingly diverse community may manifest itself in a variety of ways in the years ahead.

State of volunteerism

Critical examination of the literature, review of current external trends and issues, and survey of volunteering in the emergency services, has revealed a number of features that characterise the current state of volunteerism within the emergency services.

- Delivery of emergency services in Australia is heavily reliant on the commitment of volunteers. Despite widespread recognition of this dependence, there is a lack of information on volunteers and the issues that impact on the volunteer culture.
- There is a poor understanding of the nature of change taking place in the external environment and volunteer membership does not reflect the diversity of the broader community.
- The internal reactive nature of organisational activities means that the emergency services are focusing on specific agency initiatives when greater integration and co-operation is required.

Best Management Practice Framework

The information collected for the purpose of this research program was analysed and synthesised as a basis to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of volunteer-based emergency services. The current landscape of the sector is characterised by three distinct areas of emergency service activity: support, management and strategic activity.

Support activity: The provision of specific information, entitlements and role, support programs and services, internal and external advocacy.

Management activity: Resource management, organisational maintenance activities that are ongoing and maintain existing capacity, communication processes and representation in decision making.

Strategic activity: Research and development activities which monitor internal and external issues and trends that effect the organisation and the culture, and the relationship and recognition of volunteers and the organisation by key stakeholders.

Each have their own set of issues and can be described and contrasted on the basis of a set of relevant theoretical criteria. The activity groups can be contrasted on the basis of their function by examining the types of activities that constitute them. That is, they differ according to the nature of the contribution each makes to the state of the volunteer culture, and to the broader functioning and viability of the organisation.

Implementation and impact

By contrasting their temporal and spatial dimensions, the activity groups can be contrasted on the basis of the implementation and impact of the issues with which they are concerned. That is, they differ according to the time and space

factors relating to their implementation, and the extent and nature of their impact.

Complexity and risk control

Within each of the broad activity groups, three major levels of task are evident and each of these levels can be identified and contrasted on the basis of the complexity of the task and the associated level of risk (low, medium, high). This tends to be a product of the level of interaction involved in the task, the number of stakeholders involved, and the number of transactions between individuals and stakeholders.

These broad themes, and the issues within them, are presented in summary form in table 1 below. Under the three general activity headings, the three levels of task complexity (high, medium, and low) can be identified.

National Profile of Volunteerism

The analytical framework developed during the course of this research provides a basis for assessing and discussing specific aspects of current organisational practice in Australian volunteer-based emergency services. It also helps to understand the extent and nature of organisational activity in relation to a wide range of issues that concern the health of volunteering, and thus organisational viability.

Support

The current profile of volunteer support and management activities is characterised by an emphasis on programs that are specific in their formulation and delivery, and not part of an overall integrated management strategy.

The emergency services practice in the area of volunteer support is clearly not a priority.

Management

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that, in the past, the emergency services have been able to manage the daily activities of volunteers in a manner which has maintained reliable volunteer capacity and capability. However, some areas of concern are evident.

The emergency services do not appear to be carefully considering how capacity and capability can be maintained, despite their desire for more volunteers. Very few organisations know where their volunteers are recruited from, and what motivates them to join or to resign; and, more than likely, understand why people do not volunteer at all.

Strategy

Despite widespread recognition that Australian emergency services rely heavily on the commitment of volunteers, there is a significant lack of strategic activity within the sector. This is evidenced both by the paucity of information on this subject in the literature, and by the research findings. While organisations around the world are coming to grips with maintaining an effective capacity and capability to deliver emergency services, there is limited information available to assist them to develop strategic responses to the environment in which they operate.

Thus, volunteer-based emergency services need to move beyond the current short-term focus on operational planning and decision making and pay more attention to longer-term considerations and the management of strategic activities in order to remain viable.

Agenda for improvement

The best management practice framework provides a basis for assessing

Complexity	Support	Management	Strategy
Low	Information	Maintaining capacity	Internal assessments
Medium	Services	Maintaining capability	External assessments
High	Extension and advocacy	Communication and representation	Community links and recognition
Space	Individual volunteers	Groups of volunteers	Whole of organisation
Time	< 12 Months	12 Months–2 years	2–20 years

Table 1: Best management practice framework

current organisational and industry practice and a means of targeting future improvement strategies.

An assessment of current practice may include the following steps:

- Establish the current context and profile of organisational activity. This may require that a register of existing projects, programs, services, and products be developed. Current practice can be grouped according to the broad structure of the framework.
- Analyse the relative emphasis currently given to each activity group and its associated task areas, and the contribution each makes to the viability of the organisation and the volunteer culture. Emphasis can be determined at the basic level by the mere presence or absence of an activity, as well as by measuring inputs such as budget, resources and management commitment, and outputs in terms of numbers of volunteers trained and serviced by current programs.
- Assess the current profile against a best management practice framework. This 'audit' process will help to define gaps in current practice.
- Assess current activities and practices. This process will assist organisations to make more informed choices about how deficiencies in current organisational practice can be addressed. The broad guidelines below may be used to address identified gaps.

The activities and strategies that could be applied by volunteer-based emergency services to enhance volunteer management and support are perhaps more easily identifiable and justifiable when considered in planning and budgeting terms.

Volunteer Strategic Resource Management plan

The platform for improvement to current practice should be a Volunteer Strategic Resource Management plan that defines program objectives, projects and practices and an implementation framework with immediate and long-term horizons.

Such a plan should seek to integrate all existing programs within the framework and document the desired profile of organisational activity. This should include objectives implemented through the planning and budget process. It should address each specific area of organisational activity, and document both existing and planned activities.

Strategies should also be established to monitor and review progress in each of these areas at timely intervals. A comprehensive evaluation process will ensure

programs continue to meet objectives through time. It should also allow for programs to be adjusted to reflect changing internal and external needs and operating environments.

Conclusion

Clearly, the success and long-term viability of the emergency services will continue to depend upon the strength and commitment of volunteers. In the years ahead, the emergency services will need to ensure their volunteer base reflects the communities they serve. To achieve this, volunteer units must change, and therefore the organisations that support them must change. Those organisations that do not change risk their own survival and disconnection from the community.

It is intended that the information presented within this paper will assist volunteer-based emergency service organisations to implement appropriate strategies to manage change and ensure long-term organisational viability. However, it merely represents the initial step in what should be viewed as a much broader and longer-term agenda.

The greatest challenge now facing volunteer-based emergency services is a need to embrace prevailing change and establish priorities for action. The key to long-term viability will be dependent upon the emergency services ability to foster an environment of co-operation and develop a mechanism to facilitate inter-agency co-ordination.

References

Curtis M. & Noble J. 1990, *Volunteer Management: A Resource Manual*, Volunteer Centre of South Australia, Adelaide.

McKenzie F. & Taylor K. 1997a, *Socio-demographic profile: Victoria*, Country Fire Authority, Victoria, p. 102.

Rogers L. 1992, *Volunteering and young unemployed people: A study of young unemployed volunteers in relation to obtaining paid employment and quality of life enhancement*, The Volunteer Centre of South Australia, Adelaide.

A comprehensive bibliography is available in 'Directions in Volunteer Development in Australian Emergency Services'. Copies can be obtained free of charge from Emergency Management Australia.

Disclaimer

The information presented within this paper is a compilation of research findings sourced from 'Directions in Volunteer Development in Australian Emergency Services' (CFA, 1998). The views expressed are solely those of the

author and do not necessarily reflect CFA opinion or policy.

This paper was also presented at the 4th Annual Emergency Services Forum 'Volunteers in Emergency Services' July 21 & 22 1999, Sydney.

Revised drug donations guidelines (1999)

... now online

The Drug Donations website has just made available the revised inter-agency guidelines for drug donations published by the WHO. The old document (version 1996) on the site has been replaced by the revised document and can be found at www.drugdonations.org. You can also directly access these guidelines by going to: www.drugdonations.org/eng/richtlijnen/eng_geneesmiddelen_donatiesrichtlijnen.html (no frames).

About the Drug Donations Site...

The drugdonations.org site was recently developed to raise awareness of the need to improve the quality of drug donations. The site was created by a consortium of European NGOs led by Wemos, a Dutch NGO. Besides guidelines on drug donations and medical services, you will find a checklist for good drug donation practices, provided as a practical tool for organisations that want to professionalise their donation practices. Information provided under the heading awareness raising and advocacy will assist organisations and persons that want to initiate education activities in their communities.