

Girls Fire and Resilience Program

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Girls on Fire



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Girls on Fire is an Australian incorporated association that provides firefighting and resilience programs for girls and young women. It expanded its fire programs format to encompass the need for greater community resilience.

These broad-objective programs come in response to Australia’s 2019–20 fire season, the pandemic and demand for more knowledge and awareness of how to prevent and prepare for emergencies.

The Girls Fire Camp program was first piloted in 2018 as a recommendation by AFAC to contribute to the long-term recruitment of women to the firefighting sector. All 21 fire services agencies were participating in the Champions of Change program and were looking for ways to add diversity to frontline operational roles.

The original program was modelled on successful North American girls fire camps and was delivered via a collaborative governance structure led by Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) and included NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the NSW State Emergency Service. Firefighters Mutual Bank also threw their support behind the initiative, sponsoring the camp to enable 20 teenage girls to participate. The program was held at YMCA Camp Yarramundi with follow-up reporting to AFAC Workforce Management and Diversity and Inclusion collaboration groups. The 6-day program included 3 days of operations led by each agency, adventure activities coordinated by YMCA Camp Yarramundi and many self- and team-development activities.

This pilot program laid the foundation for the virtual and condensed formats that now exist and provided an evidence base for efficacy. This evidence base was supported by research conducted by Monash University.¹ Researchers collected and analysed qualitative and ethnographic data to measure the impacts on both participants and volunteers.

The objectives from the pilot were to provide an experiential learning program to teenage girls that gave insight into the role of first responders and encouragement to join in a volunteer or paid role. The second objective was to provide leadership development to agency representatives who volunteer on the program, providing them greater skills and confidence.

As bushfires and COVID-19 emergencies triggered responses by industry and education service providers, Girls on Fire delivered ‘Virtually Possible’ – a hybrid program of online learning followed by a 1-day hands-on training session (HOTS). New partnerships were formed with National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation, which meant the program design could include land-management activities. This was vital to provide a whole-emergency-management context and meant even more activities for the girls. Girls on Fire delivered 5 programs during 2020 instead of one, taking the experience to more students in regional areas in NSW of Dubbo, Newcastle, Mogo and 2 in the Hawkesbury. In total, 150 girls experienced fire operations during this time and 50 firefighters from the participating agencies received valuable experience and joined a network championing diversity in the sector.

In 2021, the program schedule was affected by the pandemic, but one significant program made it through the gap during COVID-19 break-outs. Girls on Fire was invited to the northwest outback town of Brewarrina by a true champion of the fire



Girls on Fire delivered its Virtual Program to nearly 300 young women in years 10–12 in NSW in 2020.

Image: Girls on Fire

and emergency services, Burra McHughes. Burra is a passionate firefighter for FRNSW and NSW RFS and a proud Ngemba man who leads and coordinates continual engagements and opportunities for his community. Acknowledging the lack of opportunities for young girls in the area, particularly Aboriginal teenagers, Burra invited Girls on Fire to run a program at the former Aboriginal shearing school, Merriman.

We gladly accepted the invitation to visit during Reconciliation Week and walk the talk of the theme 'More Than Words'. This 4-day cultural inclusion and community engagement program took the term 'collaboration' to a new level. Personnel within urban and rural fire services, land management agencies and the State Emergency Service came together for a program with broadened objectives that included building cultural competence, community safety in vulnerable communities, fire education and interoperability. The resilience aspect, for individuals and the community, was revealed and embedded.

A new partnership was formed with TAFE NSW for this program to ensure the cultural competence content was consistent with existing frameworks for education in Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander contexts. FRNSW Firefighter, Peter (PJ) Jensen, was the lead facilitator and, it's fair to say, adult and student participants were mesmerised by his yarning; sharing lived and learnt experiences and his rich connection with culture and history. Activities included boomerang and spear throwing, making fire by traditional techniques, fire-pit cooking and yarning and painting using the Indigenous traditional ochre-spitting technique. As a graduate of FRNSW's IFARES program², PJ is a huge advocate for creating opportunities for young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and making connections between history, community risk and building trust to teach safety.

This program was unique because the NSW RFS provided 2 basecamp deployment tents for the 32 participants, while the 20 mentors stayed in the old shearing quarters or their swags. The stars and the stories were equally incredible and taking this great program to the rural northwest has shaped the direction of future programs. The recruitment and leadership objectives were still met, but we experienced such meaningful connections to Country, to the complexity of challenges in regional communities and the need for fire safety education delivered practically and interactively.

The diversity of the program design was aimed at helping communities to take active roles in fire preparedness and prevention. On the last day of the program, Burra organised a multi-agency activity in which the camp participants performed a simulated emergency display. Families of the participants, teachers from the schools and other community members attended to watch and talk to the firefighters and mentors who had inspired their young people. We took this opportunity to provide community safety information, meet local frontline responders and practice our interagency cooperation—words that sound so much easier than the practice that is often inhibited by cultures.

What was conspicuous was how the program improved the overall visibility of emergency services in a positive and proactive

way, especially in Indigenous and marginalised communities. Working with other volunteers and paid staff led to greater understandings of different processes and inspired us to continue connecting with and advocating for diverse communities within our organisations.

Girls on Fire has been helped by really positive media and promotion of the programs. Girls on Fire has featured on television lifestyle shows, as well as targeted marketing through social media channels. This exposure led to more support, demand for more programs, sponsorship and a generous community grant from the National Australia Bank (NAB) Foundation. To facilitate this growth, a new governance structure and legal framework were created and Girls on Fire became an incorporated association and registered charity in 2021. This provides a clear delineation between Girls on Fire as a service provider and the other participating partners. The coordination of partners and programs will be directed by a steering committee with representatives from participating agencies.

One of the new partnerships is with Regional Industry and Education Partnership (RIEP) that provide information on vocational pathways to schools in NSW. As a taster to next year's face-to-face delivery, Girls on Fire delivered its Virtual Program to nearly 300 young women in years 10–12. The 2-part webinar provided an overview of emergency management and the emergency services organisations that participate in the Girls on Fire collaboration. The program includes the importance of resilience and how they—and members in their communities—can contribute to the prevention of and preparedness for emergencies. In the second session, representatives from each of the fire and emergency services organisations shared their roles and experiences, answered questions and encouraged the girls to join the sector. The firefighters who volunteered for the session loved the opportunity and said they, too, felt inspired to hear the experiences of other women.

Girls on Fire has a full program schedule for 2022. As well as the schools' programs through RIEP, there are 5 programs planned through the NAB Foundation grant for NSW regions of Mogo, Tathra, Lismore, mid-north coast and Tamworth during Reconciliation Week. In addition, Girls on Fire Inc will also offer virtual information sessions and 1-day HOTS programs in NSW.

The flagship program, Firefighters Mutual Bank Girls Fire and Emergency Services Program, is on hold for 2022 pending pandemic restrictions and commitment from sponsors and agencies. YMCA Camp Yarramundi is definitely ready for us to return and fingers crossed we can get back out there by July.

For more information, email info@girlsonfire.com.au and watch for updates on www.girlsonfire.com.au.

Endnotes

1. Lambert K 2019, *Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authority (AFAC): Firefighters Mutual Bank Girls' Fire and Emergency Services Camp Pilot, Sydney 2nd – 8th December, 2018*. Monash University. At: <https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/australasian-fire-and-emergency-services-authority-afac-firefight>.
2. FRNSW IFARES program, at: www.fire.nsw.gov.au/page.php?id=9202.