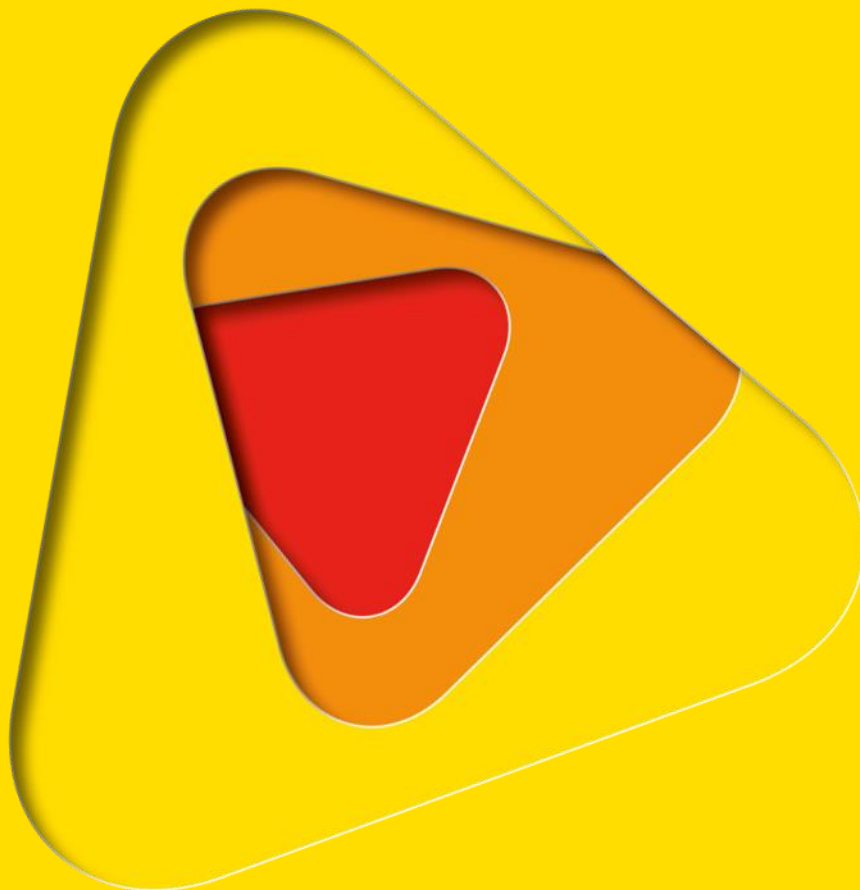




# OUT OF UNIFORM (BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE THROUGH NON-TRADITIONAL EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING): WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

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## ABSTRACT

How can the emergency management sector build capability and enable community resilience by supporting forms of volunteering that fall outside the scope of their current volunteer and community engagement models? That – in a nutshell – is the question that the *Out of Uniform (building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering)* research project was set up to answer. The project concluded in June this year, and this presentation reports on key themes that emerged across four cases studies of 'out-of-scope' volunteering in action, all of which reinforce in various ways the role and importance of coproduction.

The cases studied were diverse in context and characteristics. Despite their wide variation, however, quite a number of shared themes were found across them that included: the value of coproduction, the impact of job mobility amongst public officials, the shapes and styles of volunteer leadership, the rising importance of brokering actors, groups, networks and platforms; and the challenge of sustainability.

Taken together, these findings reveal some surprising areas where emergency management organisations can make changes to the way they engage with communities and volunteers (both affiliated and not) that can reap potentially significant capacity-building and community resilience benefits. Many of the changes are likely to concern changes to internal organisational processes, structures, and training to build capacity for establishing, maintaining and resourcing co-productive relationships with actors, groups and organisations that have not been traditionally involved in emergency management in the past.

The highly demanding nature of managing emergencies can disrupt effective team performance. These disruptions can lead to an impaired operational response, creating risks to public safety, property and other assets. This project is helping to foster cohesive teamwork when it is most needed – when teams are responding under pressure to emergency events.



## INTRODUCTION

How can the emergency management sector build capability and enable community resilience by supporting forms of volunteering that fall outside the scope of their current volunteer and community engagement models? That – in a nutshell – is the question that the *Out of Uniform (building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering)* research project was set up to answer. The project concluded in June this year, and this presentation reports on key themes that emerged across four cases studies of ‘out-of-scope’ or ‘non-traditional’ emergency volunteering in action, all of which reinforce in various ways the role and importance of coproduction as a model of public service delivery in this sector.



## BACKGROUND

A key rationale for the *Out of uniform* project is the changing landscape of volunteering, in Australia and internationally. Large-scale socioeconomic changes have recast the conditions in which people volunteer in the 21st Century [1]. As a result, emergency managers can expect to engage with a much wider and more diverse range of volunteers than in the past. At the same time, there is also growing recognition of the valuable resources and capacities within local communities and the broader public that can contribute to overall disaster prevention, preparation, response and recovery [2, 3]. With disaster risk increasing worldwide due to population growth, urban development and climate change it is likely that non-traditional volunteers will provide much of the additional surge capacity required to respond to more frequent emergencies and disasters in the future.

This changing landscape challenges existing volunteer models. It also presents new opportunities to strengthen emergency management capability and capacity, and build community resilience. However, it requires more flexible volunteering models and community engagement strategies that incorporate and respond to newer styles and contexts of emergency volunteering.



## FOUR CASE STUDIES

The four case studies included here were diverse in context and characteristics. They spanned preparedness, response and recovery; fire and flood; three jurisdictions; four very different social and hazard environments; and numerous, divergent forms of volunteering in varied organisational contexts.

### CASE STUDY 1, COMMUNITY-LED PREPAREDNESS

Be Ready Warrandyte (Be Ready) was an award-winning, community-led bushfire preparedness project coordinated by the Warrandyte Community Association between May 2012 and June 2015 [4]. Its goal was to have more households in Greater Warrandyte with effective bushfire plans. Be Ready undertook a diverse range of locally-targeted activities and involved a high degree of collaboration between local community volunteers, local governments and the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

### CASE STUDY 2, COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY

Community-On-Ground Assistance (COGA) was a citizen-initiated project that provided assistance to people who experienced property damage as a result of the 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires in Victoria, Australia [5]. The project was funded by the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF) and utilized a workforce of qualified, paid employees and corporate volunteers. COGA assisted eligible individuals, couples and families to undertake a range of activities such as property clean-up to enable rebuilding to start, carpentry and building related tasks, and rebuilding and recovery planning and advice.

### CASE STUDY 3, NGO-COORDINATED SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEERING

Emergency Volunteering – Community Response to Extreme Weather (EV CREW) is a model for registering offers of help from the public when a disaster strikes and live-matching these people to specific requests for volunteers from organisations that are helping communities [6]. It was developed by Volunteering Queensland and is now also being used in adapted forms by the volunteering peak bodies in the ACT, Tasmania and Victoria. During its major activation for the 2010/11 Brisbane floods, the EV CREW system managed approximately 120,000 registrations and referred more than 23,000 volunteers to helping organisations, predominantly the Brisbane City Council, to assist with post-flood clean up.

### CASE STUDY 4, RECOVERY VOLUNTEERING WITH NGOS, PINERY FIRE

The final case study examined the breadth of disaster recovery volunteering following the Pinery Fire in South Australia in 2015, with a particular focus on faith-based groups [7]. There is a move toward engaging volunteers and NGOs that are not traditionally involved in disaster recovery alongside those with more established roles. NGOs that coordinated volunteers to assist with the recovery effort following the Pinery fire comprised both traditional and non-traditional recovery organisations and groups, and included both faith based and non-faith based organisations.



## KEY THEMES

Despite the wide variation in the four cases studied, there was a surprising number of themes and issues shared across them. Five of the most influential, and in some cases surprising, themes were the:

1. Value of coproduction,
2. Impact of job mobility amongst public officials,
3. Shapes and styles of volunteer leadership,
4. Rising importance of brokering actors, groups, networks and platforms; and
5. The challenge of sustainability.

### VALUE OF COPRODUCTION

Co-production here refers to the direct and active involvement of citizens in the production or execution phase of public policy through the design and delivery of public services at the level of specific programs [8]. Co-production draws attention to the relationships between volunteers and public officials through which “synergy between what a government does and what citizens do can occur” [9, p.1079]. It aligns closely with ideas underpinning community-based disaster risk reduction [10].

All four cases studied involved coproduction of various depths and degrees. Also in all cases, the involvement of, and relationships between, volunteers and public officials was held by participants to be vital for the outcomes of the various groups and initiatives. This was particularly evident for Be Ready, for example, with participants stressing that the group’s achievements would not have been possible without the active support of public officials. However, they also agreed that it was the combination of being *community-led* and *government-supported* enabled it to achieve things that would not be possible as either a solely community or government undertaking.

### IMPACT OF JOB MOBILITY AMONGST PUBLIC OFFICIALS

The narrative around the change in volunteering in modern times has tended to stress the management and coordination problems associated with increasingly shorter-term and more episodic styles of volunteering. However, the other, largely overlooked side to this narrative is that paid work is also changing in a similar way [1]. In all the cases examined, job mobility amongst public officials made it difficult for volunteers and NGOs to establish and maintain good relationships with public officials, and thus garner the consistent support required from emergency management organisations for coproduction to be effective. Thus, it is not only voluntary work that is becoming increasingly shorter-term and episodic in nature, but also paid work. In both cases, this presents challenges for undertaking effective coproduction that need to be tackled.

### SHAPES AND STYLES OF VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

The shape and function of volunteer leadership is an incredibly important but little-recognised factor that both enables and challenges community- and volunteer-led coproduction. People with the vision, drive and tenacity to start up community- and volunteer-led initiatives tend not to be the kinds of leaders that are easy or comfortable for public officials to work closely with. They are likely to be critical of





the status quo and advocate for change that may challenge or disregard government policies and activities to greater or lesser extents. This more activist, driven and entrepreneurial form of volunteer leadership is often necessary to get innovative and impactful voluntary initiatives off the ground, however. Notably some of the initiatives started in this way go on to garner considerable government praise once established.

Consequently, these types of leaders should not necessarily be seen to be a problem, but also an asset. For longer-standing co-production to be successful, however, developing good working relationships between volunteers and public officials is needed. In some cases, more entrepreneurial and disruptive volunteer leaders may adapt their leadership style to help facilitate this. In other cases, leadership may change in time, with new people stepping into the role as initiatives evolve into more established activities and services.

A second noteworthy observation concerning volunteer leadership is the important leadership role of older volunteers. Often, it is older volunteers that have the professional and leadership skills, available time and good standing within their local community to lead impactful voluntary activities. This finding contrasts to some degree with the predominant narrative in emergency management that an ageing population is a problem, even a threat, for the future of emergency volunteering [see also 11].

## **RIISING IMPORTANCE OF BROKERING ACTORS, GROUPS, NETWORKS AND PLATFORMS**

Almost all examples of non-traditional emergency volunteering encountered throughout this project, inclusive of these four case studies, have involved non-governmental organisations, civil society groups or private entities acting as brokers of relationships and interactions between volunteers and emergency management organisations. The case of EV-CREW is particularly illustrative, with Volunteering Queensland fulfilling a vital role as catalyst and enabler of coordinated spontaneous volunteering that was integrated with the formal emergency management system. Meanwhile, the important recovery work of faith-based organisations and groups following the Pinery fire highlights a lack of recognition of the role and potential of faith-based groups as brokers of voluntary activity in disaster recovery, and also risk reduction [see also 12].

In some cases, including that of EV-CREW, this brokering role is enabled via online platforms that help link players and functions together. The findings of these case studies as well as other research on non-traditional emergency volunteering strongly indicates that partnerships with NGOs, established community groups and private entities *that have not traditionally been involved with emergency management, and mobilised increasingly through online platforms*, are likely to be ever more important as brokers of co-production in the future.

## **CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABILITY**

The fifth and final theme concerns recognising and tackling the financial and administrative barriers for sustaining volunteer participation in coproduction, as well as the work of brokers of co-production. Government-centric views of community resilience tend assume that community-led and voluntary initiatives ought to be self-sustaining over time, and government funding opportunities are commonly



restricted to the start-up phase only. However, seeing these initiatives through the lens of coproduction highlights how they may involve ongoing or repeated public service delivery that does not fit well with short-term project funding models and which are arguably justified recipients of public spending. Additionally, all the cases studied either struggled under the weight of administrative and reporting burdens, or alternatively flourished with administrative support, as was the case for Be Ready which benefited from government funding that it used to contract local project managers.



## CONCLUSION

Taken together, these findings reveal some surprising areas where emergency management organisations can make changes to the way they engage with communities and volunteers (both affiliated and not) that can reap potentially significant capacity-building and community resilience benefits. Many of the changes are likely to concern changes to internal organisational processes, structures, and training to build capacity for establishing, maintaining and resourcing co-productive relationships with actors, groups and organisations that have not been traditionally involved in emergency management in the past. Another implication of this research is to suggest a partial convergence of volunteer management and community engagement functions within emergency management organisations in the future. As emergency volunteering is increasingly mobilised through co-productive relationships with 'non-traditional' volunteers, and through partnerships with new brokers of co-production, the spheres of volunteer management and community engagement are increasingly likely to overlap and coalesce within these organisations.



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