



VOLUNTEERING INTO THE FUTURE – DISASTER EVENTS, LOCAL GOVERNMENTS & COMMUNITIES

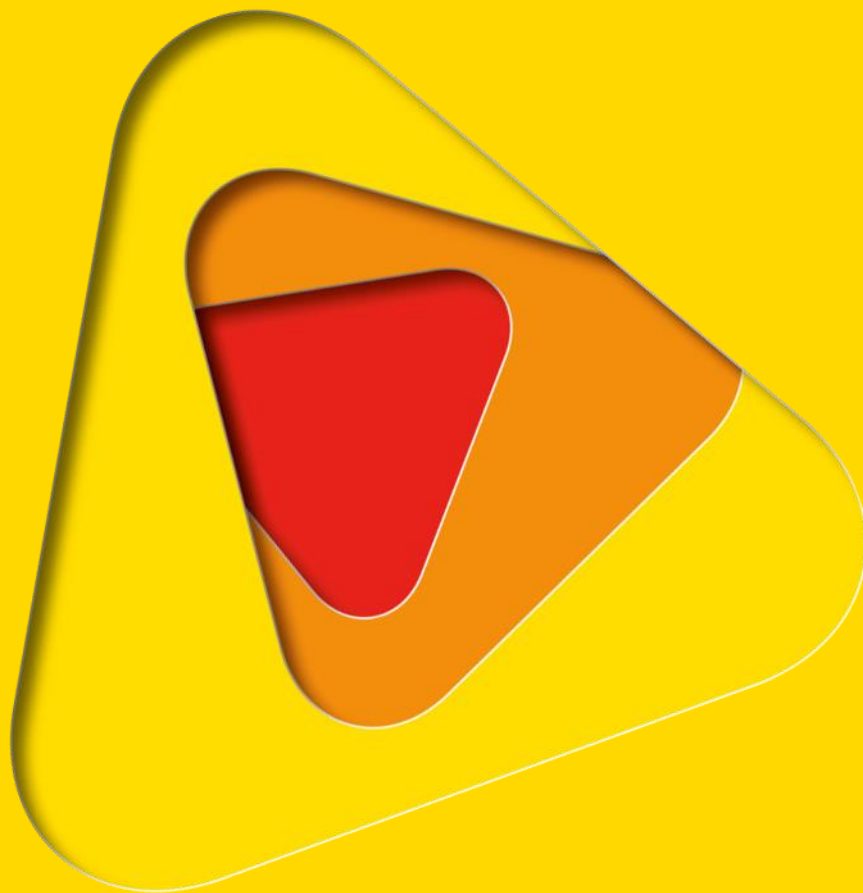
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ABSTRACT

VOLUNTEERING INTO THE FUTURE - DISASTER EVENTS, LOCAL GOVERNMENTS & COMMUNITIES

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This century presents us with many environmental challenges and the various types of hazardous events can impact urban, rural and remote communities in different ways. In Australia, councils are the closest level of government to community and many are planning and trialing a range of options to better deal with future disaster events.

The paper reports on findings from RMIT University researchers' first stage of a Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC project. The research looks at how the emergency management sector over the next decade can best enable the value of volunteering for communities before, during and after emergencies. It explores local governments' experiences with volunteering around disaster recovery and their views about a preferred future for this volunteering. It describes some of the ways councils work together with community groups and volunteers both trained and those who come forth in response to a disaster, to enhance resilience and recovery.

The research considers ideas about the emergency management (EM) sector and the need to shift and draw upon different perspectives to involve different people to broaden approaches. Improving governance structures, particularly at the state level was considered essential for moving towards the preferred future. There is a need for on-going investment in the provision of a supportive and enabling infrastructure for volunteering such as state-wide data-bases. These can enable engagement, recruitment and preparation of volunteers from across regions to support local government and communities. Interviewees highlighted the need for reform in disaster funding for the recovery process as critical and the need for ratification between state and federal government so local governments and communities have confidence in the EM space. This paper will provide a picture of what the future might look like as local governments strive to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century.



INTRODUCTION

This paper explores local governments' experiences with volunteering around disaster recovery and their views about a preferred future for this volunteering. It is based on findings from the first stage of RMIT University research for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC that looks at how the emergency management sector can best enable the value of volunteering for communities before, during and after emergencies over the next decade¹

Research on the future of volunteering around emergencies is particularly timely at the moment. An inexorable link exists between volunteerism and community capability and resilience with respect to disaster risk [1]. Communities and governments increasingly expect emergency management organisations (EMOs) to actively enable and enhance the value of volunteering for communities with respect to building community capability and resilience. This is strongly reflected in disaster management policy in Australia, embodied in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience [2].

At the same time, the landscape of emergency and disaster volunteering is transforming [3-5]. Socioeconomic changes and the social impact of new technology have led to a decline in the 'traditional' model of formal, long-term, high commitment volunteering with a single organisation that currently forms the foundation of emergency management volunteer models. Alongside this decline there is a rise in 'new' or 'non-traditional' styles of volunteering that are more diverse, fluid, episodic and digitally-enabled. There is also a corresponding increase in self-organised emergency and disaster volunteering that is not formally affiliated with, or directly managed by, EMOs [6].

This situation presents significant challenges to current volunteer management and engagement practices, particularly in recruitment and retention. The 2012 National Emergency Management Volunteer Action Plan, for example, stated that the changing landscape presented "a significant challenge for the recruitment and retention of emergency management volunteers", and labelled it "an issue of national importance that impacts on all levels of government and all Australian communities" [7, p.6].

¹ See <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/resilience-hazards/3533>



RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper is based on interviews with 17 local government representatives from across the states of Australia. The interviews are a part of a broad, exploratory study of key stakeholder views on changes that have occurred, are occurring and need to happen in volunteer management and engagement across disaster preparation, response and recovery.

The first phase of the study entailed 50 interviews with 57 key people from Australian emergency management organisations (EMOs), including non-government organisations (NGOs), community groups and local governments. This is an environmental scan – an exploratory study – and therefore the local government representatives interviewed are not an exhaustive sample.

This paper presents findings from 11 interviews with 17 local government representatives completed in late 2017 and early 2018. The 17 interviewees represented nine councils and two local government associations. They included six participants from Victoria; three from Queensland; two from Western Australia; South Australia and New South Wales; and one from Tasmania. Interviewees in the Northern Territory were invited, but no interviews were secured during the fieldwork period. We sought interviewees from local government areas that had experienced a major disaster within the last five years or who were currently actively planning for future disaster recovery volunteering.

The purpose of the interviews was to find out more about local government in relation to emergency volunteering and to explore their ideas about preferred futures. The interview guide followed a set of discussion points and this was sent to participants prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted via the telephone and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and returned to the participant for review. The findings presented are the broad themes and ideas that emerged from across the interviews. We used QSR *NVivo11* software to assist in the analysis of the data.

Interviewees' comments/quotes used in this paper are indicated by a unique ID number to deidentify participants. Excerpts from the interviews, 'the data', unless otherwise stated, reflect the majority of interviewees' experiences.



KEY FINDINGS

During interviews, participants described the activities and functions of their council and what can happen when impacted by a disaster, such as a bushfire, flood, storm or cyclone. When a disaster hits their region, local government is in situ and experiences the impacts along with their community. They are the closest level of government to community and have much insight into how council with community can prepare, respond and recover from a disastrous event. On one hand local government is there to assist community but at the same time it can struggle to organise. The scale of the disaster can disrupt and directly impact staff or council's equipment and resources and dramatically curtail recovery.

WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT VOLUNTEER LANDSCAPE OVER THE LAST 5-10 YEARS?

Interviewees noted the change in volunteering as many people no longer sign up for long-term involvement. In some areas there are more transient communities and people are not able to or cannot dedicate as much time as they previously did to training and preparedness, but when a community is impacted by disaster, many will come to the fore:

...the on-going time commitment that scares people. But I think when there is an identified serious need, then they will come out of the woodwork (LG3).

In more regional and remote areas, there is the challenge to maintain volunteer numbers. Interviewees identified issues of ageing volunteers and difficulties attracting younger people or people less inclined to volunteer for roles which can demand on-going time commitments, particularly in the emergency services. Many interviewees talked about the changing ways people volunteer and the decrease in retention rates in emergency services in their area. They described some of the deterrents for participation, such as training requirements, regular meetings and travel.

The requirements of training and the obstacles of distance and remoteness has in part been overcome with the introduction of the internet and on-line training courses, which can reduce time demands and travel for volunteers. However, it can also isolate individuals and lessen the camaraderie that can be essential for team work, particularly for emergency response teams. Furthermore, on-line learning may not suit everyone and in some remote areas access issues remain problematic:

Not everyone has access to internet and some of these old cockeys aren't going to register on-line (LG11).

Internet training can achieve things, but ...it takes away the social aspect, instead of having



a classroom of people (LG15).

Across Australia, areas and regions experience different types of hazardous events that can impact urban, rural and remote communities and the various demographic settings adds to the complexities. Communities are changing some are experiencing rural decline, others increasing urbanisation, and in other areas the population is becoming more diverse. And so the setting in which volunteering takes place is changing:

I think we need to acknowledge every community is different, so one size doesn't fit all (LG16).

Part of the impetus to broaden the roles of volunteers and bolster councils' ability and capacity to prepare, respond and recover, is climate change. Interviewees acknowledged the likelihood of more frequent large-scale events that are likely to impact their area.

WHAT ARE THE KEY VOLUNTEERING ISSUES THE SECTOR IS CURRENTLY FACING?

A major issue highlighted by interviewees is inadequate financial assistance to support volunteer programs. They often described the never-ending battle to secure more funds. As additional roles and responsibilities are often tasked to local government, this can increase the strain on their limited resources and capacity to deliver. A lack of sure federal and state government funds, for in particular, regional councils with lower populations and a smaller rate-base, to address human and financial resourcing difficulties in these areas for preparation, response and recovery projects.

The ability to harness the spontaneous response was seen as an opportunity to assist in recovery. However, some interviewees noted that volunteers can have misguided expectations of their involvement and this can be further curtailed when the disaster site is hazardous. The changing landscape of volunteering means organisations such as councils are exploring more adaptive ways that serve both the needs of organisations and the volunteers.

In a somewhat ironic way, one of the biggest hurdles for councils is the infrequency of disasters. While there is recognition of the consequences of climate change and the increasing frequency of events, it can be difficult to plan for and keep staff and volunteers motivated, trained and ready. When a disaster happens, it can have the effect of reinvigorating people for their time spent training and planning.

Staff-turnover and change in volunteers can mean that when the next disaster hits, there can be many new people who have not experienced the previous event. It is imperative that information is documented and passed on and more experienced people can share their knowledge and skills:



We don't have disasters that often and people change and so for new officers, here is what happens in this part of the world and these are the plans we have place (LG16).

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

It was clear from the interviewees that because councils are the closest level of government to community and because most local governments are the key organisation responsible for recovery, many are planning and trialing a range of volunteer management options to better deal with future disaster events. The development of different management approaches can happen as a result of a disaster event, where processes have proven to be inadequate and therefore change is essential.

One council has recruited 'volunteers' from their workforce and trained staff to operate at the recovery centre after a disaster. This means the council is primed to respond with the confidence they have a well-trained team of approximately 100 'volunteers'. In this example, interviewees described when a major cyclone hit their area, the response and recovery for the council and community was vastly improved.

Many local governments host a range of community services supported by volunteers. Councils are beginning to explore options for utilising volunteers across services, as it is not an automatic process or presumption that 'regular volunteers' will or can step into emergency volunteering.

We drew upon our existing pool of volunteers to help us with things such as helping out at community meetings ... so for things like providing psychological first aid, we were relying on the Red Cross and their volunteers (LG13).

Interviewees talked about community development processes for EM and they recognise that flexibility is key in the way they have to adapt for volunteers and the potential that lies within their community:

I have a very strong belief that because these things impact the community, we probably need to start from that point, not the other way around. When we look forward as hard as it is to know, there has got to be that flexibility and adaptability (LG11).

WHAT DOES A PREFERRED FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Interviewees described enablers, like state-wide databases and technology that has sophisticated operating systems as important features in a preferred future for disaster recovery volunteering. Databases would have up-to-date information about volunteers; team leaders; and managers of volunteers; who can be quickly tasked to support impacted communities to speed up recovery. The registration and deployment of volunteers would be a simple and straightforward process and it would be easy for people to participate and for organisations to capture their interest. Information sharing at a local



level would be widespread and an important avenue to build self-reliance within a community, just as telephone-trees once did (in some areas still continue). It would also enable volunteers from outside the area to be aligned to tasks and locally directed to help.

In a preferred future, local governments would be sufficiently funded to develop programs around preparation, response and recovery. They would have the mechanisms to support and enable volunteering and provide community education and engagement programs to raise awareness about hazards and how local people can prepare and be involved:

When it comes to volunteers by 2030, I would like to see a much more organised structure around volunteer and plans locally and regionally and to make better use of the potential of the so called spontaneous volunteers (LG17),

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN TO MOVE TOWARD THIS FUTURE?

Improving governance structures, particularly at the state level was considered essential for moving towards the preferred future. Interviewees emphasised the importance of funding to support programs developed by their state's volunteer peak organisation. There is a need for on-going investment in the provision of a supportive and enabling infrastructure for volunteering such as state-wide data-bases. These can enable engagement; recruitment and preparation of volunteers from across regions to support local government and communities:

The other challenge we have is to see the surety of the funding for the state-wide programmes, because it is fundamental to our processes. ...we will be able to engage volunteers more quickly because all of the background work has been done (LG1).

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of reform in disaster funding for the recovery process, and the ratification required between state and federal government so local governments and communities have confidence in the surety of funding in the EM space. One interviewee emphasised the EM sector is primed to respond and wait for the event to happen, whereas more attention on prevention and preparedness is critical:

I think the EM sector, the volunteer sector, needs to be much more aware of its capacity to assist in the prevention, preparedness and the building of resilience of community rather than waiting for an event to happen. Much more work in the space of the preparedness of local areas than simply waiting for local areas to fall over (LG12).

Many interviewees talked about the EM sector – within council and across other EMOs – and the need to shift and draw upon different perspectives and involve different people. The collaboration across council's community development and EM teams can broaden approaches to working with volunteers and communities in preparation, response and recovery:



Volunteering in general can provide really good surge capacity to support recovery in communities. If we are talking a large scale disaster, that is where the state's EM sector hopefully understands it, and the challenge is being able to tap into and activate the volunteers when needed (LG6,).

Fast changing and ever-improving technology was recognised as something that will continue to assist the EM sector. At the same time, it presents a challenge to keep abreast of technological developments and in particular, social media. One of the tasks for local government will be keep up-to-date with technology and cater for a range of ways of communicating with their community, particularly during a disaster.



CONCLUSION

Local government is in situ, the closest level of government to community, it is the site of the disaster. On one hand it is there to assist community, but at the same time can struggle to function when the scale of the disaster can disrupt and directly impact staff and/or council's equipment and resources and dramatically curtail recovery.

In a preferred future, local governments would be sufficiently funded to develop programs around preparation, response and recovery and keep pace with social and technological changes. There would be mechanisms like state-wide databases to support and enable volunteering and provide community engagement programs to raise awareness about hazards and how people can prepare and be involved. Importantly, governance structures, policies and frameworks at the national and state level were considered essential to provide local governments guidance and establish consistent processes. Moreover, reform in disaster funding for the recovery process would be ratified between state and federal governments so local governments and communities have confidence in the surety of funding in the EM space.

It was evident from interviewees' comments and ideas about volunteer management that local governments are considering a range of ways to best adapt to the challenges of the 21st century.

It can't look like it looks at the moment (LG10).



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