

A STATEMENT ON RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR
NATURAL HAZARDS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Volunteers play a fundamental role in the emergency management preparedness, response and recovery in Australia. As disasters and emergencies continue to become more frequent, more intense and of longer duration, the interoperability, capacity and capability of emergency management organisations to respond is being significantly tested and the reliance on volunteers and the roles they play will continue to grow.

The emergency management sector is under increasing pressure to develop adaptive emergency management policy and procedures that can respond to current and future challenges. Recent changes to the physical and social landscape in Australia, for example, shifting urban rural fringe and changing political climate, have revealed emerging and veiled volunteer issues.

Throughout 2015-2017, emergency service agencies around Australia participated in workshops hosted by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC to consider the major issues in natural hazards emergency management.

This publication on volunteering summarises the outcomes of one of these workshops and poses questions as a guide for a national research agenda in natural hazard emergency management.



Photo: CFS

Volunteers are integral to their community and their communities' resilience providing connectedness knowledge and leadership to the community, reducing reliance on the emergency management sector and increasing the community resilience of Australian communities. It is commonly understood that volunteers do more than action a function prescribed by an emergency management organisation. A volunteer in a rural setting will play a major role in their local community as they will not only turn out to an emergency event, they are likely to be involved in a range of formal and informal community activities in planning, preparation, response and recovery, including community planning, engagement and support.

Despite this, there is still an over-emphasis on the functional role of volunteers. This in part is due to the experience the emergency management sector has at demonstrating the tangible value of volunteerism. For instance, lives and properties saved, reduced response times, and the functional role are all known and used indicators and/or data sets. However, showing the intangible value to the community is more difficult as there is not always a definitive or immediate answer and government and agencies are less well versed in demonstrating intangible factors like resilience. Yet it is these intangible qualities that may well have the greatest value for the sector and benefit to the community.

- **How do emergency service volunteers contribute to the social fabric of their communities?**
- **What indicators can be used to demonstrate the tangible and intangible value of volunteers to the community?**
- **How can we calculate and demonstrate the true value of volunteers to government and community?**
- **What roles do volunteers play in their community?**
- **What are the core skills that volunteers draw on to fulfil their roles in communities?**

Volunteers, as key assets of the community, require investment from the emergency management and other sectors. This investment should include financial resources, time, and people to consider and imagine new methods and processes supporting a wider application of volunteer capacity and capability. The emergency services generally retain a command and control structure and are continuing to use traditional models to try to attract, retain, train and support volunteers. These traditional models are inherently rigid and, moreover, they resist those activities that are able to capitalise on recent trends to recruit and retain volunteers

Rising expectations of the volunteer workforce have expanded the role of volunteers, requiring upskilling in addition to the normal training regime. The focus on building community resilience is also placing new demands on the volunteers, hence investment in a more agile volunteering model that includes responsive cues to the external environment, such as the demands on volunteers based on demographic changes, rather than an internally focused model, will support different levels types of volunteer participation in the sector.

Adaptive leadership can be a powerful tool to help navigate transformation, an adaptive leader is inclusive and motivated to build resilience in the team and in the community. But encouraging this type of leadership requires significant investment in a leadership strategy that will aim to nurture and develop adaptive leadership across the board, regardless of their level or volunteer status, would equip volunteers with new skills in the emergency management.

- **How do we harness volunteer resources in a changing volunteer environment?**
- **What business models from other industries can be applied to volunteering to enable better investment from government?**
- **What does adaptive leadership look like in the emergency management sector? How can we teach this?**

The link between volunteerism and community capability is inextricable and the drive to increasing volunteerism is empowering communities to build community resilience. Progressive community engagement and resilience units within the emergency services are advocating for a shift in focus from supporting operational activities to building community capability.

A genuine shift to community resilience will change traditional paradigms and transform the sector. This transformation will require the emergency management sector to reimagine policy and procedures in particular those related to volunteering such as training, recognition, support, safety and interoperability from a community perspective. Transformation will enable the sector to consider a range of people to perform a variety of roles to increase access to core competencies.

Understanding a community perspective means recognising and appealing to community for broader engagement and recruitment of volunteers, and this means moving into previously unoccupied spaces such as non-traditional volunteering - spontaneous volunteering and the related digital volunteers. Spontaneous and digital volunteering offer new opportunities and value for the sector, but they are also threatening as they require unfamiliar processes and management.

The issue of diversity is increasingly on the forefront as cultures, values and demographics evolve. Government and private industry are already subscribing to a more holistic view of volunteers and developing a more inclusive and flexible workplace. It is important that the emergency services sector works to ensure that the workforce becomes more inclusive and representative of community in order to break down potential barriers, broaden the pool of volunteers and maximise the availability of capacity and capability.

- **How can transformation of volunteerism in the emergency management sector be encouraged and supported?**
- **What new opportunities do spontaneous and non-traditional volunteering bring?**
- **What are the barriers to diversifying the volunteer base and how can the sector break down those barriers?**



Photo: SA SES



National research priorities for natural hazards emergency management

What are the most significant natural hazard emergency management issues Australia faces over the next 10 years?

This was the question posed to emergency service agencies around Australia in a series of workshops hosted by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC throughout 2016.

This publication is an outcome of one of these workshops and part of a broader national research agenda in natural hazards emergency management being developed by the CRC.

The workshops provided an exploration of major issues that would benefit from the support of research at a national level. There was no attempt to solve any of the issues or problems raised nor was there any discussion on the details of specific research projects. The participants discussed the issues they believed were relevant to the specific topic under discussion, the relative importance of the issues and the reasons underpinning their relative importance.

This series of publications summarises the outcomes of the workshops conducted so far – more will take place in 2017. They provide a guide for future research activities by identifying national priorities across major themes. The workshop outcomes have also influenced the evolving research agenda of the CRC.

This statement has been developed with the assistance of AFAC which hosted a workshop with key natural hazard stakeholders in Melbourne and by video conference in all other Australian states on 31 January 2017.



bushfire&natural
HAZARDSCRC

◆◆◆ CONTACT US

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC
Email: office@bnhcrc.com.au

