They should be heroes

Dianne Coon reflects on the real meaning of emergency service heroes

Hero

It's the four-letter word I hate most. Like those other, less socially acceptable four-letter words, it tends to be used when people are anxious, upset or excited, when their command of vocabulary is reduced. But like those other words, it tends to confuse, divide and alienate. Let's think about the label 'hero' in the emergency management context.

We are all familiar with the scenario: A big, fire or flood threatens a rural community. The volunteer emergency services (which have actually been working quietly on the problem for several hours or days) swing into more visible public action, and the media quickly follows, snapping up images of orange-suited SES crew doing daring rescues, or of firies smeared with a scenic coating of soot and sweat. Then that word will be trotted out: *'Hero rescues pensioner's dog'*; *'the hero of the floods calls for more funding'*; *'Mayor reckons the fire fighters are the heroes of her town'*. For a day or two, the public face of the emergency response will get a bit of media attention and politicians – attracted by the pheromone of publicity – will follow, eager to be photographed with the local volunteers. The *H* word, predictably, will get a flogging.

This is the standard way we in Australian society recognise, acknowledge and reward people – either paid or volunteer – who provide emergency services to their communities. We overlook the quiet, day to day work they do under the radar, and wait until 'the big one' happens. Then we go over the top with media attention, politicians' visits, financial donations, awards and certificates, even unsolicited payments, and we happily label them heroes. This sort of behaviour, in my view, works against good disaster prevention and emergency management. It devalues and debases the ongoing work of volunteers, and potentially destroys motivation and volunteer retention.

I believe the real heroes are the people who willingly and quietly do the ordinary, unnoticed work. These people are volunteering for recovery agencies still working in the community three months after the disaster, dealing with frustrated clients and doing tedious, detailed paperwork in order to get the families decent services. They are the fire fighters who uncomplainingly turn out week after week to the minor rubbish tip fire, then dutifully dry hoses and sort out gear for hours afterward at the station. They are the volunteer ambos who cheerfully turn up at the old lady's house – no lights and sirens – to take her on the winding mountain road to hospital to get her medications checked. They are the nerds – derided by the 'real men' in the unit – who carefully read all of the management memos, fill out the statistics and wash the vehicles. They are the people who give up afternoons watching the footy or overtime at work in order to attend training – the same training session they attended last year, and the year before. They are the people who go to the meetings and read the plans and staff the phones and run the sausage sizzles to raise funds. They keep their groups and their communities going.

They keep their groups going because, by reading and submitting the boring paperwork they ensure that management knows what and how much work the unit is doing, and what its requirements are. By reading the memos they are aware that the radio channel has changed or that there is a new face in a key position, thereby avoiding embarrassment or perhaps dangerous misunderstandings. By doing the small, 'unimportant' jobs they keep their skills up, give the vehicle a run, renew their teamwork with their colleagues, check that the pagers are working, and much more. By cleaning stations and raising funds they demonstrate that the unit – and its individual volunteers – matters, both to the volunteers and their community. By doing all of these small, tedious, unnoticed tasks they ensure that their groups are ready for 'the big one' when it arrives.

In a bigger way, this 'ordinary' volunteer work keeps communities going because it is an expression of community at its best. The ambulance cases I am most proud of are not those where we saved lives (I've done a couple of those), or risked our safety to get to and extract patients (I've done at least one of those). It's when we have taken the elderly widow to hospital, chatting all the way about recipes; or helped a distressed tourist pack up her hotel room because her husband was being air lifted to hospital; or allowed a family to come to terms with the fact that their Dad might not survive this latest hospitalisation; or sat at a kitchen table for an hour, pretending to take a medical history but actually allowing a daughter to pour out her anxieties about whether she was caring appropriately for her mother. In none of these cases did I save a life, but I may have saved some psyches.

One of my greatest privileges was being able to take one of the town's stalwarts, who had devoted most of his adult life to civic work, to hospital. When he was in need his community, in the form of my colleagues and I, returned the favour. The firies who put out the blaze at the tip, or the SES crews who assist with road closures for sporting events, or the St John officers who staff the local festival are showing that they also do the small things that keep their communities functioning. The volunteers with the recovery agencies are demonstrating to disaster victims, in the most clear and tangible way, that, long after the media have moved on to their next drama and the politicians are seeking votes elsewhere, their community has not forgotten them, and will keep working to help them restore their lives.

In short, all this ordinary work gives our communities something at least as important as safety; it gives them dignity.

Which is where my dislike of the *H* word comes in. By labelling as 'heroic' actions fuelled by adrenaline, excitement or fear (all the stuff that happens when 'the big one' hits) we are devaluing the true heroism of the work which prepares for this, and which signifies to our most vulnerable citizens that they are important and cared about.

All volunteer emergency services report a spike in recruitment immediately after a large or very public event, but both research and long-term experience shows that people who join in this fashion rarely last more than a few months. Once they discover that there is not a lot of abseiling down cliffs or pulling live people from burning buildings, let alone regular attention from the media, they lose interest. Meanwhile, the real heroes have had their skills maintenance programs upset by the need to train recruits, and the equilibrium and teamwork of the unit has been disturbed by the influx of new people. However, they are still faithfully putting out the tip fires and submitting the tedious reports.

I would like our community, our politicians, and our media to consider a new definition: *Heroes are the people who do the ordinary work, which enables the extraordinary to be done*.

Let's make sure we notice and acknowledge the people who are frequently at the station cleaning, sorting, preparing, training; who are in the back room staffing the radios while others are on the front line operating the cutting equipment; who are preparing food and driving long distances in searing heat to deliver it; who are sitting gently reassuring distressed people while their colleagues yell 'CLEAR!' with defibrillator paddles in their hands; who are still visiting families three months after they lost their homes. It is these people who are our greatest expressions of community.

They should be heroes.

Author

Dianne Coon works in the tourist industry in Strahan where she lives, on Tasmania's rugged West Coast. She is a Volunteer Ambulance Officer, and represents ambulance volunteers on the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum.

Unsung heroes – Volunteers make sandwiches for emergency services personnel during recent bushfires.