Future challenges for volunteer based emergency services

Deb Parkin explores the challenges facing Australia's emergency management volunteer sector and their implications for Emergency Service leaders.

Abstract

The issues of declining volunteer numbers are now well established. Aging population, rural population decline, climate change, the changing of family dynamics and the complex whole-of-life pressures facing individuals impact on the willingness and ability of individuals to volunteer time for community service. The challenge for the leadership of Emergency Service Organisations is to expand their volunteer base at a rate that corresponds with the population in growth areas whilst maintaining service delivery standards to small remote communities where population is declining.

Introduction

Context

To remain viable many Australian emergency service organisations depend on the strength and commitment of a base of volunteer members. Without them, governments and communities at large would be unable to cope with disasters or fund the resources and services required to deal with them.

Declining Numbers

Volunteer numbers have declined rapidly over recent decades. In 1993 the decline in the participation rates of volunteers in Victoria's Country Fire Authority (CFA) was 'identified as a significant strategic risk to CFA' (CFA submission, Impact of Structural Change in the Victorian Economy, 2001 p8). Research carried out by Woodward in 1997 (see Woodward, 1999), and supporting data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (see Lyons & Fabiansson, 1998) documented the actual decline in CFA rural/regional volunteer numbers of about 15,000 during the period from 1990 to 1997, this represented a rate of between 4.4% and 4.8% per annum. At the time, the CFA's response to this was stark. Commenting in a Victorian Government submission in 2001, it was noted that "at that rate, if unchecked, the volunteer emergency services workforce... could be halved in 10 to 15 years and be gone within a generation." (CFA submission, 2001 p8).

Increasing Workload

Declining volunteer numbers coupled with increasing demands for accountability and responsiveness to community expectations has directly impacted on the amount of work volunteers are involved in. 'These requirements have added significantly to the number of hours volunteers must allocate annually to... activities. Many volunteers have been unable to meet these new demands on their time and have therefore found it necessary or convenient to resign'. (CFA submission, 2001, p23).

Past research (see McGill 1996; Lyons & Fabiansson 1998; Reinholtd & Smith, 1998; Aitken, 1999; Oster 2000; CFA Submission 2001; EMA Volunteer Summit Report 2001; Emery 2001; Ford 2002 & 2003; Aldridge, 2003; and others) shows that demands on emergency service volunteers and their respective organisations have continued to increase as community expectation for support during emergencies have 'grown more quickly than... the capacity of the sector to meet them' (Emergency Management Australia – Volunteer Summit, 2001 p5). One source of pressure is demographic change. Emergency services now operate 'in an environment where economic and social pressures have become major factors in maintaining a viable and vibrant volunteer base.' (Emergency Management Australia – Volunteer Summit, 2001 p5). For example Foster (1997) notes that on the demand side,

> *'increases in population in the outer Melbourne areas over the last 5 years have been in the range of 10% and 25%. This directly increases the number and complexity of risks to which brigades are required to respond.' (p5)*

Conversely, volunteer supply is diminishing – 'for many organisations, new members are few and existing volunteers are under stress from increasing workloads and organisational change.' (Reinholtd & Smith, 1998. p1). As Murray (2000) suggests, the 'world is far more complex than it was... demands... are constant, compelling and often competing, so it is not always clear how... skills and resources can best be deployed' (see Green, 2007, p23).

Increasing liability

Murray (2000) argues that 'it is not time that is bringing change but the evolution of... society' (Green, 2007, p23). Changes in community expectation have impacted on the legal position of Emergency Service Organisations (ESOs). As communities demand to be kept safe and to be kept informed, there is increased focus on the legal responsibilities of emergency organisations that demands a higher level of accountability than ever before. This has lead to 'perceived and actual fear about the extent of legal liability that may rest with an ESO or its people after an incident' (Dunlop, 2004. p30). The Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria Association's noted in their response to the Victorian OH&S Act Review Discussion Paper that, 'there is a genuine fear amongst volunteers about litigation... where volunteer members have been reluctant to take leadership offices... because of the potential for litigation' (VFBV., 2003 p3).

Catalysts and response

The extent of the impact of declining numbers, increasing workload and increasing liability has been recognised in the field. "The significance of these challenges... [have] been widely recognised in recent years, both in terms of the critical role played by volunteers, and in terms of the extent to which the volunteer culture is under threat." (Reinholtd & Smith., 1998 p2).

Triggers

Linton

In December 1998, 5 firefighters died as a result of wildfire entrapment in the Linton fire. A number of issues emerged from the study of the Linton fire, Reducing the Risk of Entrapment in Wildfire (CFA, July 1999), that highlighted some of the key risk factors that need to be addressed to minimize the likelihood of similar tragedies.

The State Coroner, Graeme Johnstone, stated that "the evidence at these Inquests has identified a number of key causative factors in the areas of management systems, supervision and instruction, information transfer, training and experience that have effectively led to the deaths" (Coroners Report, Linton 2002. p596). The recommendations impacted nationally resulting in the establishment of rigorous standards and qualifications for fire fighter training and development. The challenges of skills acquisition and skills maintenance places particular pressure on volunteers.

September 11

The impact of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 has resounded throughout the world and has had particular impact on the emergency management sector. "More than 2,600 people died at the World Trade Centre, 125 died at the Pentagon; 256 died on the four planes. The death toll surpassed that at Pearl Harbour in December 1941." (9/11 Commission Report, 2002. pg2)

The 9/11 Commission Report, Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, Executive Summary (2002) highlights a number of weaknesses in the structure and operating procedures within the government bodies and agencies responsible for prevention, preparation, response and recovery to disasters.

The emphasis of the Commission Report is on the need for unity, unity between agencies and organisations to achieve coordinated multi agency response. As security and terrorism become increasingly significant issues, the Emergency Management system needs to be able to embrace a very wide group of participants more effectively than has been done in the past and is evidence that the effort spent on risks associated with new hazards may be at the expense of that spent on 'traditional' hazards.

Climate change

CSIRO modelling, based on IPCC projections, suggests that annual average temperature in Australia is expected to increase by between 0.4° to 2.0° C by 2030 and by between 1.0° to 6.0°C by 2070. Under these conditions the following shifts in Australian weather patterns are considered likely;

- An increase in potential evaporation and heat-waves, and fewer frosts. Where rainfall reductions are accompanied by increasing evaporation trends, severe drought is expected.
- Rising sea levels
- Progressively less rainfall and higher temperatures
- Frequent alternations between heavy rains and prolonged droughts
- Increasingly extreme weather patterns – more intense tropical cyclones and storm surges. (Allen Consulting, 2004. p7)

Williams (2007), argues that the "trends we are witnessing with global warming, [and] over-accumulated fuels in fire-prone forests . . .suggest that the fire protected strategies we have used in the past may no longer serve us so well in the future". How prepared are emergency services to deal with longer droughts and heavier rains, storms that could be more violent and occur more frequently, changing incident of pests and disease?

Additionally, the Federal Police Commissioner, Mick Keelty argues that "climate change is going to be the security issue of the 21st century" (Canberra Times, 2007, pg1) and that it has the "potential to wreak havoc, cause more deaths and pose national security issues like we've never seen before". (Anderson, 2007). He continued with:

> *"a catastrophic drop in rainfall will lead to a massive failure in crops and a rise in hunger, and to diseases becoming rampant. Rising sea levels will flood low-lying areas, forcing people off the land. The consequence will be mass displacement of people . . . and social unrest." (Canberra Times, 2007, p1).*

All have the potential to impact negatively on emergency management capability and capacity.

Value of volunteers

Value of the volunteer contribution

The value of the contribution that the tens of thousand volunteers make to the Australian Economy had long been underestimated until Hourigan (2001) released a report with the aim to;

- Highlight the breadth, and the significant value, of the contribution made by the volunteers... to the community; and
- Present estimates of the economic value of... volunteer activities.

Other objectives of the report were to encourage the establishment of formal methodologies and standards of reporting the economic contribution of volunteers and, to promote awareness of the economic contribution and the consequences should these contributions cease. As a result of this work "the 'free' labour and other contributions made by volunteers... have been estimated (very conservatively) to save the Victorian community a minimum of $470 million per annum (based on data for the 2000/01 financial year). Continued decline in volunteer numbers and volunteer participation therefore has the potential to impact the State's public finances." (CFA Submission, 2001)

Volunteer Summit

Emergency Management Australia (EMA), in conjunction with the Department of Family and Community Services, conducted a National Summit for volunteer leaders and managers from within the emergency management sector in response to the United Nations declaration that 2001 should be the International Year of Volunteers. The Summit, entitled Value your Volunteers or Lose Them focused on the goal of strengthening volunteerism within the emergency management sector.

The summit report states that "there is no way that governments could fund even a small fraction of the services provided by the volunteers and [without volunteers] the Australian community would be forced to accept much less support than we generally take for granted". The report also states that volunteers are the "backbone of the emergency management structures throughout Australia" (EMA Summit Report2001. p5). The delegates of the Summit "consider that their sector is largely taken for granted and that this has led to under funding for essential protective clothing, safety equipment, training, and in some cases inadequate legal protection." (EMA Summit Report 2001. p7)

Summary

The 'triggers' listed above are examples of the increasing pressures on emergency service organisations, the high level of community expectation and the resulting increase in workload for volunteers that contribute to volunteer decline. External trends have the potential to impact on the way emergency service organisations operate and their service delivery standards. The impact of climate change and the increasing threat of terrorism must influence the provision of emergency services yet there is little literature available on the treatments, trends and issues to date.

Future challenges

Impact of Socio-Demographic change

Socio-economic changes impact significantly on volunteerism in emergency service organizations and have been the subject of investigation and analysis by a large number of researchers, (see Reinholtd & Smith, 1998; Lyons & Fabiansson, 1998; Woodward, 2000; Woodward & Kallman, 2001; and others). These researches have "developed conceptual frameworks for understanding the interactions between them and how these factors have impacted on local communities (and on volunteerism)" (CFA submission, 2001).

Reinholtd & Smith's (1998) research explored the concept that "factors such as population growth, rural and urban mobility, and increasing cultural diversity present challenges to service providers [that] increase the demands for, and complexities of, service delivery by volunteers and create complex management issues." (p1)

Population

It has been well documented that population distribution is rarely static in either Australia or other countries (refer Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports). While some areas experience growth others experience population decline, the effects of which can have serious impact on local communities. Population levels can be extremely volatile in some of Australia's

more remote communities especially where employment activity contributes to the population base. (McKenzie, 1994; Reinholtd & Smith, 1998; Aitken, 2000).

The Department of Sustainability and Environment's September 2003 newsletter Projections, Projections, Projections reviews New population projections of Australia and states:

> *"In all projections, the age structures of the population become more skewed to older ager groups. . . Victoria's median age increase from 35.3 in 2002, to 42.4 in 2031 and 45.5 in 2051. The number of children would drop by 38,000 by 2031 and 57,000 by 2051. Contrast this with the over 60 population – projected to grow by 480,000 by 2031 and by over 600,000 by 2051. . .[as a result] population growth rates are bound to fall owing to ageing populations and below replacement level fertility rates". (p3)*

This significant decline in the 'younger' age group and the dramatic increase in the number of forty five to sixty (plus) year olds "signal an increasing difficulty for recruitment of volunteers". (CFA submission, 2001. p4). Two key challenges exist for ESO's; the ability to expand the volunteer base at a rate corresponding with the population in growth areas and, the ability to maintain service delivery standards to small remote communities where population is declining. "It is possible that in future high population mobility and volatility will also challenge the notion of the volunteer base as a permanent fixture, or the point from which services are delivered." (Reinholtd & Smith, 1998. p15). This would suggest that emergency service organisations need to review recruitment strategies that attract the interest of the 'younger' population and then look at ways to arm them with transferable skills, whilst providing support to existing volunteers in the maintenance of service delivery standards.

Legal Issues

One change that is having notable impact on retention and recruitment of volunteers is the increasing demands in relation to the law. In October 2001, 400 volunteers from a wide range of volunteer organisations met to discuss some of the issues facing emergency service volunteers in Australia (see Volunteer Summit Report –Value your Volunteers or Lose Them). One of the major recommendations of the Summit centered on the theme of Legal Protection with the aim of "better levels of legal protection of volunteers against claims of negligence during the conduct of volunteer work". (CFA submission 2001. p5). In a Summit presentation by Mr Peter Smith from the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, reference was made to the result of extensive public scoping in the United States where the "US Congress enacted... legislation and in their preamble... declare[d] that 'the willingness of volunteers to offer their services is deterred by the potential for liability actions against them. As a result, many non-profit and private organisations have been adversely affected by the withdrawal of volunteers'." (Summit Report 2001, p39). Participants at the Summit noted that the level of legal protection for volunteers in Australia was deficient and that all organisations represented needed to review the legal risks that their volunteers faced to enable legislative amendments and policy to be developed.

Dunlop's paper, Legal issues in Emergency Management: lessons from the last decade presented at the Safer Sustainable Communities Australian Disaster Conference in September 2003 addresses "the significant changes and understanding about the law that applies to emergency management" (p26). She states that the last ten years has seen significant changes in law of negligence that have particular implications for emergency service agencies. "Changes in community expectation have influenced the degree of judicial and quasi-judicial scrutiny of Emergency Service Organisations (ESOs)" (p26).

Dunlop (2003) points out that ten years ago ESOs "were rarely sued, rarely questioned and rarely thought to be affected by legislation such as Occupational Health and Safety Acts" (p26). Dunlop provides a simple comparison of the inquests into the Ash Wednesday bushfires of February 1983 and the Linton Inquiry of 2000. Thirteen volunteer CFA firefighters lost their lives in a single incident at Upper Beaconsfield during Ash Wednesday in 1983. The volunteer firefighter responsible for the initial deployment of the firefighters was called as the primary witness and commenced giving evidence at 11.43am on the 4th of November, 1983 and concluded at 4.00pm on the same day. Only four other witnesses were called. The Linton inquest commenced in July 2000. It concluded after sitting for 98 days during which time 175 witnesses were called, 94 of whom gave evidence orally to the Court and the 15 major witnesses each gave evidence for between 3 and 8 days. "This comparison demonstrates both the increased scrutiny and the increased complexity that come with the modern inquiry into a disaster. This complexity arises in part because of the ever increasing complexity of the law as it applies to ESOs" (ibid, p27). It is unlikely that this level of scrutiny will diminish in the short term.

Time Factors

Time demand on volunteers is a factor that has been identified repeatedly throughout the available research. Aldridge (2003) states, "it is a proven fact that the family and work commitment is the greatest factor in volunteer loss" (p11).

Further analysis of the data collected showed that "time demands was the most frequent reason for leaving CFA" (Woodward & Kallman, 2001. p91). The definition of

'time demands' was identified as work commitments (51%), family commitments (25%) and personal commitments (21%).

Aldridge (2003) argues that "unfortunately with the increases in work and family commitments the workload of volunteer firefighters is also increasing with a higher number of incidents and greater administrative load." (p8). He goes on to suggest that "this is an area where timely research may have a favourable impact, if conducted and acted upon." (p6). Renholtd & Smith's (1998) research identified that 'time commitment' was the "most common internal factor discouraging both males and females from volunteering" and that "Organisations reported that time limitations most commonly discourage potential volunteers' supporting the suggestion that time limitations not only motivate volunteers to leave but may be effective in discouraging others from volunteering to join the emergency services." (p42)

Summary

The impact of these changes on ESO's contributes not only to a reduction in volunteer numbers but also to inefficiencies in service delivery and increased financial pressures. Population movement contributes to a reduction in the number of people available to volunteer and to the loss of local experience, skills and equipment (particularly Personal Protective Clothing) that result in increased costs for the agency and higher workloads for remaining volunteers. Social change has meant that individuals tend to look to their own needs rather than those of their community as time becomes a more precious commodity.

This changing environment demands a more practical approach in the way that ESOs manage their volunteers. For example, population movement requires transferable skills across a range of disciplines and creates an opportunity for agencies to promote "the value of national qualifications which are universally recognised and therefore portable not only within the emergency sector, but to... outside employment" (CFA Submission, 2001. p6). Population movement also demands that agencies develop the ability to support existing volunteers to avoid workload burn out. Structural change provides an opportunity for agencies to support local communities by developing partnerships with business and industry that create employment opportunity. Social change means re-thinking recruitment strategies to address the 'what's in it for me' attitude and to attract youth. Strategies need to clearly promote what the individual will gain from the volunteer experience.

There has also been limited discussion on the impact of changing legislation on volunteers except from the perception of the law makers who, quite correctly, cite significant issues for the ESO but do not necessarily address the issues from the perspective of the volunteer. As identified in the recommendations of the Volunteer Summit of 2001, EMOs must take the time to get the feedback from the ground up if they are to provide the support really needed by the volunteers.

CFA's Submission on the Impact of Structural Change on Volunteerism Within CFA (2001) refers to the outcomes of the Volunteer Summit, Value your Volunteers or Loose Them (2001) in its conclusions by noting that the 'volunteers themselves have identified recognition (by way of adjustments to policies affecting volunteers), easier access to training (especially through the TAFE system), better levels of legal protection and some form of monetary support for employers of volunteers and for the out-of-pocket expenses of volunteers themselves' (p33) as examples of some the tangible support that is needed to secure the long-term viability of volunteer participation. It is interesting to note here that reference to training is not made specifically in relation to operational training (which is often considered the 'only' training) indeed, providing training over a wider spectrum - office administration for example; could be of benefit to both to volunteers and community.

Further research is required into the opportunities for developing partnerships with government, industry, employers and volunteers with the view to strengthening communities. Investigation of existing resources and services within and external to agencies, is needed to assess opportunities for agencies to develop and implement programs within brigades and brigade communities.

Conclusion

Decline in volunteer numbers continues to be an issue for emergency service organisations. The decline can be contributed to environmental, socio and economic changes that effect demographic profiles and employment opportunities. These changes result in increases in volunteer workload, time demands and the potential for legal liability. The issues are now well established. Aging population, rural population decline, climate change, the changing of family dynamics and the complex whole-of-life pressures facing individuals impact on the willingness and ability of individuals to volunteer time for community service. The challenge for the leadership of Emergency Service Organisations is to expand their volunteer base at a rate that corresponds with the population in growth areas whilst maintaining service delivery standards to small remote communities where population is declining.

Reinholtd & Smith (1998) argue an 'Agenda for Improvement' for Emergency Service leadership is to "maintain a thorough understanding of the issues surrounding volunteering and actively promote the needs and role of volunteers in a variety of forums." (p61). Reinholtd (1999) further argues that "the key to long-term viability will be dependent upon the emergency services ability to foster an environment of co-operation" (p9). Ford (2002) states that ESOs have to find ways to "reduce the workload and pressures affecting brigades and volunteers [through sharing] the workload by encouraging other members of the community into our brigades to help with tasks other than fire fighting" (p3).

Volunteer workload management must become a priority of Emergency Service Leaders if service delivery capability and capacity are to be maintained or, in some cases, delivered.

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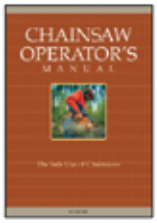

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