

# Managing spontaneous volunteers in emergencies: a local government perspective

Lucy Saaroni, Yarra City Council, explains how a risk-benefit assessment can help local government engage with spontaneous volunteers. 

## ABSTRACT

In Victoria, the state government expects municipal councils to make arrangements for the management of spontaneous volunteers in emergencies (Department of Justice 2013). As the primary interface between the public and all tiers of government, councils will invariably be confronted by offers of assistance from spontaneous volunteers, possibly at municipal emergency relief centres, but also via municipal facilities, council social media channels and local groups with ties to the council.

Refusing to interact with or actively manage spontaneous volunteers will not diminish the increasing number of people offering to help, as the 2003 and 2009 bushfires and the 2010 and 2011 floods in Victoria have demonstrated. A risk-benefit assessment can help councils understand why they should engage with spontaneous volunteers as a matter of effective municipal emergency management.

## Introduction

The expectation that municipal councils will make arrangements for the management of spontaneous volunteers in emergencies is not set out in any specific legislation. Additionally, no explicit guidance has been provided to councils on how to make a decision about managing spontaneous volunteers. Ultimately it is up to councils to decide how they will respond to offers of assistance. The question for councils is: should Council accept and integrate spontaneous volunteers into its emergency management operations? Or should Council redirect spontaneous volunteers to other agencies with a history of volunteer management in emergencies like Red Cross?

Determining a local government approach to responding to spontaneous offers of in-kind support is complex. There are risks and benefits associated with a policy to engage with and induct spontaneous

volunteers into emergency activities. Additionally, there are risks and benefits associated with a policy to refuse spontaneous volunteers integrating with Council emergency management activities.

A recent study was conducted in Frankston City Council to identify and assess risks and benefits of using or refusing spontaneous volunteers. Findings from the case study confirmed the importance of developing a municipal-based spontaneous volunteer management plan as a means to effectively harness the capabilities of spontaneous volunteers, while managing risks posed by the added managerial requirements.

The study established that perceptions around spontaneous volunteers and their management could be flawed. Four main categories of risks and benefits were identified around a policy to accept or refuse offers of assistance from spontaneous volunteers. The categories were:

- the 'unknown' nature of spontaneous volunteers
- litigious and insurance issues
- financial implications
- social implications.

## The 'unknown' nature of spontaneous volunteers

The identities, qualifications, motivations and capabilities of spontaneous volunteers may not be easily verifiable. However, local Volunteer Resource Centres can act as a filtering system to register, process (and potentially assess) spontaneous volunteers on Council's behalf. It is possible to minimise the risk of engaging incompetent, under-qualified or disruptive volunteers by adopting a management plan whereby volunteers are assigned only to tasks they are assessed as being capable to undertake. After major emergencies, many mundane yet essential activities may be required: cleaning, laundry, catering, processing material aid, traffic management, administration, etc. These tasks may not necessarily be conducted in Council emergency relief, recovery or co-ordination centres, meaning that working directly with vulnerable and affected people can be avoided completely.

Just as some spontaneous volunteers may not have appropriate qualifications, capabilities and motivations, others may actually have specialist skills and local knowledge, which would greatly benefit emergency management activities. Community members may be able to add fresh perspective or enhanced local knowledge, thereby assisting the work of council officers in identifying and assisting people in need of relief and recovery assistance. There is obvious value in incorporating local knowledge provided by willing spontaneous volunteers who are intimately linked to the local geography and social networks. However councils need to scrutinise that local knowledge for accuracy and relevance. A process on why and how information is assessed can be detailed in a spontaneous volunteer management plan so that volunteers can refer to this if their information is being challenged.

Integrating spontaneous volunteers into council activities would likely minimise ad hoc groups and volunteers instigating potentially dangerous activities without endorsement from recognised and authorised emergency management agencies. A policy of acceptance and integration of spontaneous volunteers into council activities may therefore prove to be a more fruitful exercise in risk mitigation: for the council, for agencies requiring volunteer support, and for spontaneous volunteers themselves.

### Litigious and insurance issues

By enlisting spontaneous volunteers to undertake work on behalf of councils there is a potential for councils to be held liable for damaging acts caused by its volunteers. Councils are covered under Liability Mutual Insurance policies for claims involving spontaneous volunteers in the same way they are covered for claims involving 'regular'/non-spontaneous volunteers (MAV Insurance 2011). Where councils are found to be negligent towards volunteers, coverage is provided under this insurance. Furthermore, many councils have personal accident and health and safety insurance policies that provide coverage in circumstances where councils are not deemed negligent.

It is also worth noting that there is little evidence to suggest that municipalities would be sued for activities undertaken by spontaneous volunteers. Additionally, a formal review of tort law in Australia in 2002 found that cases against volunteers themselves are negligible (Commonwealth of Australia 2002).

### Financial implications

Whether councils choose to accept or refuse offers from spontaneous volunteers, any spontaneous volunteer management plan requires a level of human and material resourcing. Every emergency event is unique and exact cost estimates are impossible to provide. However, direct council costs relating to the implementation of a spontaneous volunteer

management policy and plan would likely include trained staff and facilities for:

- communicating with spontaneous volunteers
- registering, screening and processing volunteers (unless this is done by an external agency such as the Volunteer Resource Centre).

If councils choose to accept and integrate spontaneous volunteers with council activities, additional costs could include:

- staff required to train, brief, roster and supervise the volunteers
- equipment and protective clothing
- transportation for deployment
- accommodation and meals
- counselling after the emergency event.

But these costs need to be considered in conjunction with financial benefits. In Victoria, the value of volunteer time alone has been estimated at \$19 million a year (Ganewatta & Handmer 2009). Specific research on spontaneous volunteerism has established that the contribution offers a means for governments to save on costs (Bittman & Fisher 2006).

Using spontaneous volunteers presents an opportunity for councils to save on ongoing service delivery costs and also safeguard their business continuity immediately following an emergency event. Almost every emergency management role designated to council staff is an 'add-on' to substantive positions, 'effectively making their emergency management role a "bit" part of their day-to-day roles' (MAV 2011, p. 6). Allowing spontaneous volunteers to undertake certain council activities, council staff can focus on competing priorities such as restoring and managing local infrastructure.

There is also an added element of gender imbalance in local government employment that can negatively affect council business continuity during emergencies. In Victoria, significantly more female than male staff are employed. Given that women may need to look after children or the household during emergencies, spontaneous volunteers provide a potential solution to council female staff absenteeism in emergencies and provide councils with additional capacity to maintain business continuity.

Financial costs and benefits of using spontaneous volunteers do not provide an accurate overall picture for councils keen to determine a best-practice approach to spontaneous volunteer management. Consideration is required for balancing financial outlays associated with a policy to accept and integrate spontaneous volunteers against the financial cost of repairing damage to reputation as a result of a policy to refuse assistance of spontaneous volunteers. Experiences of the 2003 and 2009 bushfires in Victoria have shown that refusing to take advantage of and value the input of spontaneous volunteers may lead to a degradation of organisational reputation and

disengagement with ongoing volunteering and civic engagement [see Cottrell 2010, Indian 2007, Steffen & Fothergill 2009]. This can result in longer-term financial and social disadvantages to both councils and their communities.

## Social implications

Experiences in Victoria and further abroad demonstrate that engaging with spontaneous volunteers can greatly benefit individual, organisational and community recovery. Individual recovery is intimately linked with spontaneous volunteerism because in an emergency event, spontaneous volunteers are legitimate stakeholders; they have a right and may have a need to volunteer as part of their personal recovery process, especially if they are affected directly by the emergency. The Federal Government claims that affected persons should be involved in emergency management activities for practical reasons because 'disaster-affected people, households and communities understand their needs better than any of the professional, government, non-government or corporate supporters' (Commonwealth of Australia 2011, p. 1).

In addition to benefitting individual recovery, spontaneous volunteerism has been found to directly benefit organisations. Engaging affected people who want to help provides organisations with a means to shift away from encouraging passivity in communities, to fostering a proactive and connected community that assumes shared responsibility for emergency management. Spontaneous volunteerism also benefits staff welfare by boosting staff morale and productivity (see Kendra & Wachtendorf 2001). It builds relationships between the organisation's staff and community members; this has long-term benefits for future council service delivery.

Finally, spontaneous volunteerism can significantly speed up community recovery. One of the lessons following the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires was that 'communities recover best when they manage their own recovery' (Hill, Hill & Gray 1987, p. 11). When spontaneous volunteers identify as community members they have both a right and a responsibility to assist in the rebuilding of their community. Council's role should be to foster and harness those rights and responsibilities wherever possible. Given the immediacy of spontaneous volunteerism it is important that Council has processes in place to manage this goodwill as 'recovery started badly is almost impossible to reclaim given its long-term impacts on the structure, relationship and functioning of the community' (Leadbeater 2013, p. 46).

The key to effectively managing spontaneous volunteers is having the ability to strike a productive balance between the management of core business activities and catering to the needs of all stakeholders; spontaneous volunteers included. A policy to accept offers of assistance from spontaneous volunteers (as long as they are within the parameters outlined in the spontaneous volunteer management plan) and

communicating this policy and plan to stakeholders should allow councils to make the most of community goodwill while minimising many of the risks that spontaneous volunteerism presents.

## Conclusion

Local governments become effective emergency managers when they are able to recognise *opportunity* in risk; when they can envisage beyond the initial chaos of response and lay solid foundations for relief and recovery operations.

There is ample evidence to suggest that it is more productive for local governments to conceptualise spontaneous volunteers as a positive, necessary and useful resource in the realm of emergency management. Indeed, a council policy to accept offers of in-kind support from spontaneous volunteers *where practical* is likely to be more beneficial in the long-term, financially, socially and psychologically, not only for Council, but for ratepayers, for spontaneous volunteers, and for other groups working alongside councils during the emergency event.

Having a management plan that clearly documents how, where, when and why spontaneous volunteers can and cannot be used in council activities is essential in being able to harness public goodwill. At the same time, this kind of well-scoped management plan facilitates council staff in coherently communicating refusals to people whose offers to help are rejected.

Approaching spontaneous volunteer management with a policy of engagement, acceptance and integration is not risk-free. Risk is a normal part of emergency management and effective emergency management is about placing risk in the hands of those who have a right, a responsibility, capacity and capability to manage it.



Kathy Ryan, Manager of Spontaneous Emergency Volunteer, Gabrielle Williams, Victoria Parliamentary Secretary and Craig Lapsley, Victoria Fire Services Commissioner at the launch of the Manager Spontaneous Emergency Volunteers Project.

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### About the author

**Lucy Saaroni** is an emergency management practitioner working in the Victorian local government sector. She holds a MSc (distinction) in Risk, Crisis and Disaster Management from the University of Leciester, is a member of the Australian Institute of Emergency Services and has completed an Advanced Diploma in Public Safety (Emergency Management) at the Australian Emergency Management Institute.

### Manager of Spontaneous Emergency Volunteers project

The Manager of Spontaneous Emergency Volunteers pilot project has been conducted in the G21 region<sup>1</sup> to recruit, train and support managers of spontaneous volunteers in an emergency. Volunteering Victoria is the lead agency for the project, supported by Volunteering Geelong, City of Greater Geelong and Australian Red Cross. The pilot has been incorporated in a State wide rollout of the program. Information on the success of the pilot project is available at: <http://volunteeringvictoria.org.au/msev1-project/>.

<sup>1</sup> The G21 region comprises the City of Greater Geelong, Borough of Queenscliff, Colac Otway Shire, Golden Plains Shire and Surf Coast Shire.



Image: Alison Duff, Volunteering Victoria

Spontaneous Emergency Volunteers managers are trained to support spontaneous volunteers in emergencies in the Geelong region.