

VOLUNTEERING REIMAGINED



VOLUNTEERING
REIMAGINED  SES

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Foreword

From humble beginnings in the Hunter in 1955, the NSW SES has changed dramatically over the last 64 years. Our volunteers are responding to more incidents and are involved in a greater variety of tasks.

There's also a lot that hasn't changed - our volunteers still join their local unit and undertake regular training to build their skills and experience. In fact our volunteering model has remained mostly unchanged since 1955.

As our communities grow and the risk of damage from severe weather events increases, the NSW SES is building greater capability to ensure we are prepared for nature's worst. Over the past three years we have been working closely with researchers from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre and examining best practice from other volunteer emergency services worldwide to develop a new volunteering model. The model has broadened both the capacity and capability of our organisation and is a fresh approach to overcome some constraints that have seen our numbers decline in the past.

We know people are working harder, studying for longer and have greater family demands, while faced with higher mortgages and lower job security. We're also experiencing more frequent and damaging severe weather events. We need to be more adaptable and accommodating to this changing landscape and develop a strong volunteer base to meet future challenges.

The approach outlined in this paper is a modern approach to emergency services volunteering and part of the NSW SES's vision to be the best volunteer emergency service in Australia.

Background

Approximately 9300 people currently volunteer with the NSW SES which forms part of the 250,000 emergency services volunteers across the country. Emergency services volunteers are likely to be in greater demand in the future as the NSW population grows and more communities are affected by severe weather, resulting in greater economic losses (Mechler and Bouwer, 2014). This increase in demand will be challenged by the measured decline in conventional volunteering - that is, volunteering which requires a high level of commitment over a longer period. While traditional volunteering rates are falling, there is a rise in the number of people engaged in more "diverse, fluid and episodic styles of volunteering" (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003).

Changes to modern lifestyles are transforming the way people volunteer. Technology, cultural globalisation, changes in the nature of community and increasing demands of paid employment are all impacting the way in which community members volunteer. McLennan et al (2015) notes that this shift in lifestyles has led to more diverse volunteering roles, and a move away from volunteering which requires a longer, more demanding commitment. Newer volunteering styles involve shorter experiences, recognition of existing skills, greater loyalty to a particular cause rather than an organisation, greater importance for personal benefits and more individualism when making a choice about where to volunteer (McLennan et al, 2013). Palmer (2003) observed that emergency service volunteering in rural parts of Australia is declining while urban areas are experiencing an increase in volunteering. This trend is evident in NSW SES where units are operating with a membership of one or two people in some rural and remote areas, while many metropolitan units are at capacity.



Volunteering in Australia is becoming increasingly professionalised and volunteers are often considered part of a larger workforce of members. At the same time, possibly as a consequence of the professionalisation, informal volunteering is increasing within communities (Volunteering Australia, 2010). Evidence details many situations in which informal volunteers have become involved in emergencies and as a result the emergency response has been improved (Scanlan et. al., 2014).

During 2014 the NSW Auditor General conducted an audit into the management of volunteers in the NSW SES and concluded that

the Service “needs to improve how it selects and retains the right volunteers and provide more up-to-date and focused training” (NSW Auditor General, 2014). The Audit found the Service’s turnover rate of 26% was higher than SES agencies in other states, and that of the 1700 volunteers who join the NSW SES each, approximately half resign before completing twelve months service.

Volunteering Reimagined was launched in September 2017 with new policies and procedures to increase flexibility. Three new categories of membership were introduced to enable community members to get involved in new ways. As a result of these new initiatives, the NSW SES volunteer workforce has grown by more than 21% and another 1000 people have expressed an interest in volunteering in the future and have registered their details with NSW SES.



New opportunities to volunteer with NSW SES

Within the NSW SES a community typically refers to a group of residents located within a geographic area. In a modern world with increasing globalisation, communities span geographic boundaries and represent people with common interests, attitudes and skills. Technology allows these communities to stay connected no matter the physical locations of the individual members, creating an opportunity for the NSW SES to target skilled individuals from diverse backgrounds, not necessarily located within their own communities or within NSW. A diverse workforce will equip the Service with new skills, views and networks into communities. An increase in the number of volunteers will also enhance community resilience. Flexible volunteering options such as spontaneous volunteering will lift up and skill residents so they have a clearer awareness of local hazards, can better prepare themselves and can bounce forward following a disaster.

The NSW SES has recognised some of the external forces and the changing landscape of volunteering within Australia, and developed a new volunteering model. *Volunteering Reimagined* includes four main pathways including the current model of volunteering, which is to be known as 'Unit volunteers'. Each pathway has a varying level of commitment and training required to enable a diverse range of community members to engage with the Service. Current research into volunteering in emergency services suggests a fundamental shift is required for agencies to recruit and retain volunteer members in the future. The NSW SES reimagined the Service's volunteering model based on four key pillars:

- Increase the capability of the NSW SES volunteer workforce to prepare for and respond to disasters
- Diversify membership through increasing flexibility in roles
- Foster a sense of community within volunteers, build social capital and develop greater community resilience
- Ensure a positive experience for volunteers that leads to higher retention and repeat volunteering

Spontaneous Volunteers

The NSW SES is actively coordinating and utilising the skills and experience of community members before, during and after incidents in a range of roles. Spontaneous volunteers often work as part of recovery efforts - for example cleaning mud from flooded houses or assisting with sorting debris, however they may also be involved in preparation and response activities such as filling sandbags, assisting with logistics, catering or as part of a storm



damage response team. Spontaneous volunteers may decide to become a Unit Volunteer with the NSW SES in the future.

Corporate Volunteers

Corporate volunteers assist the NSW SES through an employer volunteer program in their workplace. The NSW SES has partnered with eight organisations to utilise the skills and experience of the organisation's members in preparedness to and recovery from severe weather events. These organisations include the University of New England, NSW Surf Life Saving, Team Rubicon, Charles Sturt University and Evolution Mining. Corporate volunteers provide a surge capacity to the NSW SES but may also have specialist skills which could be utilised in their role, either in an operational position or outside of operational times.



Community Action Team Volunteers

The NSW SES has more than 240 units across NSW in major suburbs of Sydney, and within most towns and centres across regional NSW. In some smaller communities, the NSW SES has worked with local residents to provide basic training to a local team of community members. This model known as Community Action Teams (CATs) engages residents through volunteering so that



community members are able to prepare themselves for floods and storms. Their commitment is minimal and members can use their existing skills and networks to enhance the capability of their CAT, for example if they are fluent in a particular language. In some communities, the NSW SES has provided a cache of equipment stored in a shipping container or trailer, which can be used by team members when the community is impacted.

These additional categories of membership provide the NSW SES with a greater operational

capability however the Service will always rely on trained volunteers with a higher level of commitment to lead units and undertake skilled roles in flood rescue, storm and water damage and road crash rescue for example. Unit volunteers will continue to train regularly and maintain currency for their skills however the Service has updated volunteer membership policies and procedures to enable additional flexibility.

Case Studies

Berowra Hailstorm

During December 2018 the community of Berowra was impacted by a significant hail storm with jagged hail stones of up to 8 cm impacting almost every property in the community.

NSW SES teams were deployed from across the state to assist with this event along with resources from the NSW Rural Fire Service and Fire + Rescue NSW. Resources were stretched very thin as emergency services responded to impacted communities across Sydney, and with Christmas just a few days away there was pressure to complete jobs as quickly as possible for the benefit of both the community but also our members.

A call to arms was put to the local community via the Berowra Community Facebook page and what started as a trickle of locals turning up to fill sandbags turned into a large number of community members putting their hand up to help in a variety of different ways. After a fit for task assessment, spontaneous volunteers from all walks of life were signed up to assist with sandbagging, logistics, door knocking, an extra set of hands in storm teams, radio operators, community liaison and catering.



Uranquinty Community Action Team

The community of Uranquinty near Wagga Wagga can be isolated during periods of heavy rainfall and the town's 715 residents unable to receive help from emergency services. The local Progress Association formed a Community Action Team in 2014 and have since established a cache of equipment on a property in the town. Members have basic training in communications, sandbagging and other emergency skills, and can assist Uranquinty residents prior to the NSW SES arriving - or when the NSW SES is unable to attend due to flooding. The Uranquinty community has been recognised for their resilience and other communities have begun to form similar groups. Read more: <https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-30-03-19>



For further information

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