

AUSTRALIAN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT VOLUNTEER FORUM

SUBMISSION TO THE COAG REVIEW INTO BUSH FIRE

MITIGATION AND MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The emergency volunteer sector is vital to Australia's capability to deal with natural disasters, particularly bush fires, which require large numbers of responders. While the volunteer fire fighters were in the forefront in the recent bush fires, there was a large number of emergency volunteer organisations, which worked with them, providing vital support during the response operations and assisting with the recovery. The success of major operations depends on a team effort from the whole sector, not just from the lead agencies. Further, it should be remembered that volunteer organisations are the lead agencies for all of Australia's natural disasters, so they are vital to our safety.

Australia has a proud tradition of volunteering, and we are fortunate indeed to have a strong emergency volunteer sector. However, recent events have highlighted that while the sector is not in crisis, there are problems within it, which if not addressed, have the potential to weaken it and reduce the effectiveness of its contribution to the safety and well-being of the community.

There is no doubt that it is more difficult to be a volunteer today than it was in the past. There are many alternatives to volunteering, particularly in the emergency sector, in which the demands are generally heavier than in other environments, and periodically there are life threatening risks to face. Social and economic pressures are greater today than they were in the past and emergency sector volunteers need to devote more time than ever to their organisations, as equipment becomes more sophisticated and performance standards rise.

In these circumstances, it is appropriate to seek to expose the main problems within the sector and propose initiatives, which will assist in overcoming them, as well as suggesting some options designed to strengthen the sector into the future.

THE AUSTRALIAN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT VOLUNTEER FORUM

In 2001, Emergency Management Australia and the Department of Family and Community Services sponsored an emergency volunteer summit as one of the major

activities to mark the United Nations sponsored International Year of the Volunteer. Over 400 attended, with 80% being volunteers and the remainder, their managers. The Summit sought to examine the state of the sector under the heading “: Value Your Volunteers or Lose Them “.

By far the most consistent theme during the Summit was the desire for a national consultative forum to represent the emergency volunteer sector, and Emergency Management Australia subsequently facilitated the formation of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum, (AEMVF), which has met quarterly since April 2002. The Forum was determined to be:

A national forum representative of the volunteer emergency management sector, to facilitate better communication between The organisations within it and to provide advocacy for the sector as a whole and its members.

The member organisations are:

ADRACARE
ANGLICARE
Australian Council of State Emergency Services
Australasian Fire Authorities Council
Australian Institute of Emergency Services
Australian Red Cross
Australian Volunteer Coast Guard
Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol
State Emergency Services Volunteer Organisation
St John Ambulance
St Vincent de Paul
Surf Lifesaving Australia
The Salvation Army
Volunteer Ambulance Officers Association
Volunteer Fire Fighters Association
Volunteer Rescue Association
Volunteering Australia
Emergency Management Australia (ex officio)

The objectives of the AEMVF are:

To foster communication between one another and government
With
To
provide advocacy, particularly on behalf of the non-

Government members

To

focus on Training, Legal/Protection

Funding and Recognition

The members of the AEMVF unanimously resolved that a submission should be made to the COAG Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management on behalf of the emergency volunteer sector in order to highlight the major problems which are faced by the sector, and to propose initiatives which will strengthen it into the future.

TRAINING

Training is acknowledged by the members of the AEMVF as a vital component in the effectiveness of the contribution of the emergency sector and all organisations devote considerable time and effort to it. The sector has generally embraced the National Training Reform Agenda, which has brought with it national standards of competence. The advantages of a national approach to training became immediately obvious to the volunteers, particularly when dealing with major disasters, which are no respecters of State and Territory boundaries. However, it needs to be recognised that the move to competency based training has meant that the volunteers are required to devote considerably more of their time to training than was the case in the past, and this places additional pressures upon them.

For their parent organisations, the implementation of the competency based system of training has meant a dramatic increase in the administrative load. The recording and reporting requirements and the compliance standards are significantly more demanding than they were with the old training system. This relatively new requirement has placed considerable pressure on a number of the members of the AEMVF, particular the non-government organisations, some of which have no permanent staff and they need assistance. Governments could broker partnerships between those organisations which are in this position, and the larger organisations within the sector, all of whom are already Registered Training Organisations. This initiative could have some modest resource implications, but it would be far more efficient and cost effective than having the smaller organisations partner with outside organisations.

One of the more significant negative decisions recently has been the abolition of the Public Safety Industry Training Body (ITAB), and placement of the public safety industry back into a much larger government training advisory body, with which there is no commonality of purpose, and which failed some years ago. All members of the AEMVF are absolutely opposed to this decision, and the Forum has made representations to the Australian National Training Authority and to the Minister for Training and Education. When the Public Safety ITAB was formed, the volunteer organisations had, for the first time, an equal status at the training policy table with the paid organisations of the industry. This recent decision, which places the public safety industry back into a grouping which failed, relegates the public safety industry to a lesser status, and the

volunteer sector to an even lower status. The volunteers see this decision as an example of the lack of understanding by government of their needs.

A proposal to recognise volunteers as trainees has been put to the Minister for Training and Education, but at the time of writing this submission, no reply has been received. This would provide an enormous incentive to the volunteers and their parent organisations, and would show in real terms how much their efforts are appreciated. All members of the AEMVF are Registered Training Organisations (RTO), or have partnerships in place, and significant assistance is provided to RTO and their parent organisations if they take on trainees and new apprentices. This assistance is provided through State Training Authorities on application from the parent organisations. However, volunteers and their parent organisations are excluded from this scheme because they are not recognised as employees, even though they are completing Training Package qualifications, in accordance with the National Training Reform Agenda. In effect, the volunteer sector of the public safety industry is the only industry which is self funding the entire skill development for its trainees, due to a technicality.

LEGAL PROTECTION

There have been considerable improvements in the protection of emergency sector volunteers in recent years. However, there are still gaps. In several jurisdictions, the new legislation has focussed on protecting the individuals, which is essential, but has not included protecting the parent organisations. This gap has left some of the non-government organisations of the sector very vulnerable and it needs to be closed

In some jurisdictions, there are liability problems with casual volunteers. Casual volunteers are members of the public who offer their services during a disaster, or who are requested to assist because of their special expertise or equipment. An example of the latter is the members of horse clubs who were asked to provide their floats to move valuable livestock from the path of the recent bush fires, and did so willingly. Casual volunteers require protection similar to the organisational volunteers, who are generally protected under the emergency acts of each State and Territory.

A number of the organisations within the sector are having difficulty obtaining suitable public liability insurance, without which they cannot operate. While there have been legislative reforms in some jurisdictions, costs are still very high and availability is limited. It is the view of the AEMVF that governments have a responsibility to assist the emergency volunteer sector organisations obtain the insurance protection they require.

Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) requirements have increased in recent years, particularly with regard to personal protective clothing and individual safety equipment. (PPE) A number of the organisations within the sector require their members to purchase their own, several receive grants and others provide it centrally. Apart from the inappropriateness of volunteers having to purchase their own PPE, contemporary OH&S

requirements dictate that it should be provided centrally. This is seen to be the only sure way to ensure that it meets current standards.

FUNDING

As stated above, some of the member organisations of the AEMVF are forced to require their volunteers to purchase their own PPE, and at least one charges a membership fee. This situation, along with the increasing cost of insurance places great pressure on them, and governments are urged review their level of support, so at least the basics are provided, and volunteers do not have to pay for the privilege of assisting the community.

Members of the AEMVF unanimously reject the notion of a fee for service, as this contravenes the most fundamental tenet of volunteerism. However, financial assistance in the event of hardship due to loss of income, is supported, provided it is available to all participating organisations. On a previous occasion, assistance was offered to the lead agency only and this was very destructive of morale. The AEMVF would prefer that no assistance be offered, unless it is available to all organisations.

The AEMVF believes that there would be great merit in introducing a scheme which provided support to the employers of emergency sector volunteers, without whose support, the sector would hardly exist. There is often mention of a scheme similar to that available to the employers of Defence Force Reservists, but the Forum would prefer that the matter be investigated in the context of emergency sector volunteers, as there may be a need for something quite different.

Indications are that the local brigades and units of the two government volunteer emergency services (Bush Fire Services and State and Territory Emergency Services) are likely to lose their charitable status, when the new charities legislation comes into force in mid 2004. At local level, virtually all of these groups must raise funds to maintain their level of service, and if their charitable status is lost, there is likely to be a crisis of considerable proportions. Discussions are being held with the Australian Tax Office, which appears to be sympathetic, but so far there has been no resolution of the problem.

While there is no indication that the non-government organisations within the sector are likely to be vulnerable when the new legislation comes into force, several are very worried, and would benefit from an assurance that their charitable status will be protected for the future. There are enough financial stresses and strains within the sector already, without such unnecessary pressures being allowed to occur. Positive action is required.

RECOGNITION

The members of the AEMVF believe that they are largely taken for granted by governments and the community. They often compare the amount of publicity given to the Olympic volunteers, most of whom worked for around a month, to that which they receive for tens of years of service, sometimes in life threatening situations. On the other hand, they appreciate the extension of the National Medal to the non-government organisations, and the introduction of the Emergency Services Medal. They also note with pleasure an improvement in the level of recognition at local community level.

They attribute most of the problems which the sector is experiencing, and which are recorded herein, to a lack of recognition, and most would opt for better support for their organisations, rather than individual rewards. There is, however, support as well for individual incentives, which they see as providing encouragement for recruiting and retention. There have been suggestions of a small tax deduction for effective members of accredited organisations, reductions in state and territory government charges and local government rates. They do not see the amounts needing to be large, but rather as providing a tangible demonstration that they are appreciated.

The member organisations of the AEMVF would appreciate the opportunity to meet with governments in order to put their case personally for greater recognition, as they hold the view that their views are somehow not being heard. They feel that if they can make their case personally, the problems can be solved, because ultimately they are not seeking very much, and the validity of their case will be quickly obvious to all.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- The AEMVF be acknowledged as the legitimate national peak body for the emergency volunteer sector.
- Governments assist emergency volunteer organisations to meet the requirements of the National Training Reform Agenda, including brokering partnerships between organisations.
- A suitable industry advisory structure be agreed to in order to protect the public safety industry, in particular the volunteer sector.
- Emergency sector volunteers be recognised as trainees.
- Legislation designed to protect the emergency volunteer sector be expanded to include the parent organisations of the emergency volunteers and casual volunteers.
- Assistance be provided to emergency sector volunteer organisations to ensure that they have appropriate insurance coverage.
- Support to emergency volunteer sector organisations be extended to include the direct purchase of personal protective clothing and mandatory individual safety equipment.

- The level of support to emergency volunteer organisations be increased so that volunteers do not have to pay membership fees.
- The notion of a fee for service for emergency sector volunteers be removed from consideration.
- Any financial assistance schemes provided to offset hardship be available to all participating organisations, not just the lead agency.
- Employer support be examined to assist the employers of emergency sector volunteers, who may be unavailable for work due to operations.
- The charitable status of all emergency sector volunteer organisations be protected.
- Incentive schemes be examined to encourage recruiting and retention within the emergency volunteer sector.
- Regular consultative sessions be conducted between governments and the emergency volunteer sector in order to examine ways of improving recognition of the sector and the volunteers.

CONCLUSION

The recent bush fires emphasise the reliance Australia places on the emergency volunteer sector, which must grow in terms of capabilities and standards as government and community requirements increase. The sector is experiencing difficulty in meeting the myriad of new requirements in the areas of safety, training, management, equipment and insurance, in a social and economic environment which places considerable pressure on the volunteers themselves. It is important that these problems be recognised and addressed, or there is a risk that, over time, the ability of the sector to support the Australian community in times of disaster, will not match the need.