

Volunteering in Emergency Services: the South Australian perspective

Australia would become dysfunctional if it were not for its volunteers. Volunteers come from all walks of life and provide their services in many different arenas. From emergency services to the arts, from localised service delivery to strategic roles such as membership of boards and committees, the input of Australia's volunteers has traditionally and continues to be the backbone of this country. The nature of volunteering itself is changing, with the increasing formalisation of the volunteer sector.

Some 15 years ago Eva Schindler-Rainman (1984) wrote that volunteering was moving from the 'no longer to the not yet'. In real terms, the effect of this on the industry of volunteerism means 'Change, Challenge, Creativity, Choice and Collaboration' (Schindler-Rainman 1984).

The face of Australian volunteers, in these rapidly changing times, is also changing, as is the structure and settings in which people volunteer. With changing demographics such as urbanisation, the ageing population, zero population growth and more women entering the workforce comes a plethora of issues for the volunteer industry. One group of volunteers particularly feeling the sharp edge of these changes is the emergency service volunteers.

Emergency Services in South Australia, with particular reference in this instance to the Country Fire Service (CFS) and the State Emergency Service (SES) rely entirely on its self-managed, volunteer teams to provide a professional, reliable and efficient response to a range of emergencies at the local level. It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the total voluntary contributions of Australians as many organisations that utilise volunteers are still developing mechanisms to measure their exact numbers and the hours worked. Conservative estimates are that around 2.6 million volunteers contribute a total of 433.9 million hours a year (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995). Good news, but how does this relate to emergency services, and why, then, is it becoming increasingly difficult for emergency services to recruit and retain volunteers and, more importantly, what can be done about it?

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A look at the changing trends in volunteering may provide part of the answer. There is a perception that there are less older people volunteering. 'There is some anecdotal evidence that ageing Baby Boomers are selfish and not wanting to volunteer' (Volunteering Vision 2001 July 2000). Older Australians are also healthier and are staying in the workforce longer, leaving less time to devote to volunteering than they historically have. Younger people are volunteering, however, for short periods and sometimes in a variety of different sectors. Government initiatives such as mutual obligation and increasing emphasis on community service through educational institutions and the workplace are seen to have contributed to this. Often younger people volunteer to gain job skills and for social reasons, particularly in urban areas.

There have been limited studies undertaken that indicate there is a difference between urban and rural volunteers. It appears that urban volunteers are enticed to volunteering more by the prospect of job skills and social contact and to a slightly lesser degree to provide service to their communities. Rural volunteers tend to be motivated foremost to serve and protect their own lives and properties and that of their communities, with social contact and job skills being a low priority for these volunteers (Gare 2000).

Change has been one of the greatest issues affecting emergency service volunteers over the past few years, in particular, the last two years in South Australia. Indeed, Schindler-Rainman (1984) was almost crystal-ball gazing when all those years ago she pointed out that, 'nationally and internationally, the Volunteer World is in transition. It is moving from the past to the present, and from the present to the future. If we manage, indeed strategise, these transitions carefully we can impact the direction of

change, and we can be pro-active in directing the changes in ways we desire. The time between now and the changed situation is the "Transition State", and it is this state we must learn to manage. We must learn transition management skills and strategies.' (Schindler-Rainman 1984).

The formation of the Emergency Services Administrative Unit (ESAU) is an indication of the times of change we live in. 'It will be necessary to develop new and creative ways to involve and integrate new populations, and to become familiar and comfortable with organisations different from our own so that collaboration becomes easy and natural. We need to be clear about and proud of our strengths, skills, and knowledge, and know how to communicate these.' (Schindler-Rainman 1984).

ESAU was formed to provide administrative functions for three emergency service agencies in South Australia, the Country Fire Service (CFS), the State Emergency Service (SES) and the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SAMFS). For the purposes of this article, the focus is on the CFS and SES as local service delivery is via volunteers. Schindler-Rainman (1984) also points out the necessity of doing things in different, new and creative ways. 'To develop new and different funding patterns and sources; to barter for services, space, equipment usage; to find all the ways in which volunteers and professionals can extend and humanise our services; to learn to understand and utilise new technologies; to become more accountable and cost effective; to evaluate our services, to scrutinise our goal and mission statements and, if necessary, to reprioritise and re-order them or develop new ones; to utilise the corporate responsibility emphasis and commitment more than we have in the past'.

Demand for volunteer leaders to adopt modern management practices is increasing. This is effectively widening the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', in terms of the experience, knowledge and skills of volunteers in emergency services, ESAU, through the Volunteer Management Branch (VMB) provides support services

to assist in closing the gap. Higher levels of accountability and responsibility both on and off the incident battlefield go hand in hand with these demands, creating pressures emergency service volunteers are grappling with on a daily basis.

There exists a wide range of skills, experience and knowledge within the emergency service organisations, with a great lean towards the hands on, operational side of the business. This leaves gaps in non-operational aspects of running an organisation. As a higher level of accountability and responsibility are required, support services such as those provided by the VMB are becoming essential to ensure the long-term healthy functioning of a brigade or unit. A survey carried out in the UK in 1998 by the Institute for Volunteering Research indicates that more voluntary organisations are moving towards formal structures in volunteer management. Conclusions from the survey support the localised support service delivery of the VMB as, 'volunteer management appears to be becoming increasingly formalised...'

Our model of service delivery is quite unique. Developments in the volunteer industry over the past decade move towards a more professional view of volunteer management and involvement. Accountability, responsibility and structure are becoming more the norm in recent years in contrast to the past, more informal nature of volunteering. Emergency service volunteers are responsible for organising, managing and running their own organisations, both operationally and non-operationally. Physical resources and funding are provided through the State with CFS and SES volunteers responsible and accountable for both.

The provision of support and structure to volunteers through formal mechanisms appears to be a global trend in a variety of volunteering streams, such as community service, the arts, health, education, sport and recreation, environment and emergency services. In South Australia, numbers of volunteers in emergency services (CFS and SES) exceed 20,000. Volunteer management support services are localised through regionally based Volunteer Support Officers (VSO's) who work with individual brigades and units on a local level as the need dictates with a centrally based coordinated approach to policy and planning.

VSO's provide consultancy services around recruitment, retention and recognition of volunteers along with resources and tools to assist with recruitment

campaigns, recognition and retention programs. Leadership and management have a strong focus with training provided to volunteers for both. Support for administration functions is also provided by the VSO.

Brokerage services are utilised for issues such as mediation and conflict resolution, whereby the VSO facilitates external assistance in the resolution of issues at a local level. VSO's also provide advocacy services when required. For example, this can take the form of negotiating with employers, terms and conditions of release of volunteers for attendance at incidents.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain volunteers in any industry, as previously mentioned. Competition between organisations for people with the necessary skills and interests is fierce with prospective volunteers expecting increasing professionalism when they enter voluntary organisations. These expectations cover a range of areas, such as up to date management practices, exceptional leadership of local volunteers and top quality, recognised training.

This begins with impressive recruiting campaigns and continues with appropriate selection processes, job descriptions, induction and orientation, on the job and specialised training that includes state of the art technology and up to date equipment (and they deserve no less!). The prospective volunteer will also expect, and be entitled to, open lines of communication and information about the systems and processes that are utilised both internally and within the wider organisation. Information about OH&S policies and procedures, what their insurance entitlements are, reimbursement for out of pocket expenses, in fact any policy or procedure that protects the volunteer and enhances their volunteering contribution.

Volunteers will also expect to observe a transparent and consultative decision making process and have recognised input into that process. There will be an explicitly stated vision and mission of both the larger organisation and the brigade or unit the volunteer joins. They will expect to work as a team to set the direction and goals for the brigade or unit and will be prepared to undertake the tasks necessary to do their part in reaching the goals.

They will work with people who are exceptional communicators, who know their jobs and their people well, who take responsibility for their actions and expect others to take responsibility for theirs

also. The new volunteer will expect their team to be professional and have integrity, their leader to understand them, what makes them tick and to give them assignments or duties that both compliment and challenge their skills, experience and interests.

This does not even begin to take into account the complex operational functions, roles and responsibilities that make up the core business of the volunteer teams. Wow! A big ask for people who are volunteers and volunteer managers — the majority of whom do the job in the first place to protect their communities, people who have their own jobs, families and would like a bit of leisure time occasionally.

Sometimes, support, education, advice and encouragement does not go astray. The level of support provided by the VSO's varies according to the needs and requests of the brigade or unit. The VSO might just provide information on OH&S issues or provide linkages to trained OH&S staff. There might be a need for management training in a range of areas such as, succession planning, administration, teamwork, conflict resolution, how to run effective meetings, delegating, team communication or dealing with difficult people. The VSO is trained and equipped to deliver these on a local level, usually at the local brigade or unit and usually on a night volunteers already get together to train.

There is a strong demand for VSO's to assist in the planning and execution of a recruitment drive, the induction process, setting up or refining administrative systems, planning awards programs, maintaining up to date membership files, or just someone to point the direction through the bureaucratic maze so volunteers can get what they need to do their job.

These localised support services are complemented by several statewide initiatives of the VMB. Once such initiative is the provision of scholarships for the Diploma of Community Services (Volunteer Management). Volunteers are encouraged to undertake the Diploma, which has been developed through a partnership between Volunteering SA and Onkaparinga TAFE. VMB provides sponsorship for volunteers to attend conferences that have a focus on volunteering, with two volunteers recently returning from the 16th World Volunteer Conference in Amsterdam. Many more volunteers have attended local conferences hosted by Volunteering Australia and Volunteering SA. A program of sponsorship to

SAAVA (South Australian Association for Volunteer Administration) is also provided by VMB.

Recruiting resources are also available on a statewide basis as well as locally and include a freecall 1300 telephone number, opportunity for advertisement placement on the 'govolunteer' website, telemarketing and recruiting brochures and posters.

Harnessing the interest of youth in volunteering in emergency services has also been an increased focus in recent times. The appointment of a Youth Programs Officer (YPO) to the VMB serves to develop Cadet programs, train Cadet Coordinators, develop, implement and monitor policies and procedures that will enhance young peoples involvement in emergency services and provide pathways to volunteering as an adult. The intent of Cadet programs is to provide safe, structured and enjoyable experiences for young people as they move through their cadetship. This in turn will encourage more young people to value the experience of

volunteering in emergency services, demystify the services for them and encourage continuation of their involvement as adults.

In conclusion, it appears that with the increasing demands on volunteers to lead and manage their teams in a professional manner amidst a rapidly changing environment, support services such as those provided by the VMB are now, and will continue to be, essential to volunteers. This is a new approach to many volunteers in CFS and SES and can be considered part of the long-term change process.

The change process often takes many years as the culture of the services grapples with new ideas and different ways of achieving objectives.

Support services such as Volunteer Management, OH&S and Risk Management will develop and grow in line with changing needs and demands and will continue to compliment existing services that enhance the operational side of the volunteer opportunities.

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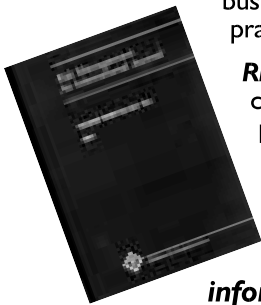
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