

# Volunteers' national peak body mooted by Summit

Emergency management and services volunteers are planning to form a National Peak Body following a three-day Summit meeting in Canberra in mid-October.

The volunteers acknowledged their need for a National Peak Body, which can represent volunteer emergency related organisations and give effect to the major recommendations from the Summit.

More than 400 emergency management volunteers and representatives of volunteer organisations met in Canberra on October 10, 11 and 12, to tackle some of the issues facing emergency management volunteers in Australia.

The Summit was officially opened by the Governor-General, Dr Peter Hollingworth AC OBE.

In the emergency management sector, the volunteers are the people who rescue victims from car crashes and marine accidents, fight fires, protect property, evacuate people in floods and provide first aid and medical help at mass gathering such as sporting events, rallies and protests. They are the people who play a critical role in helping the community recover from disasters like floods and storms, building collapses and rail and bus accidents.

The 400 people in Canberra last week represented the half a million volunteers in the emergency management sector — from State Emergency Services, St John Ambulance Australia, church-based groups such as Anglicare and Adracare, Red Cross, Salvation Army and surf life saving, search and rescue dog associations, coastal patrols, marine rescue and fire authorities in every State and Territory.

The Summit was organised by Emergency Management Australia with the support of the Department of Family and Community Services as part of the International Year of Volunteers. With the theme: 'value your volunteers or lose them', it focussed on the ways to develop a stronger volunteer sector. Through workshops and plenary sessions, it tackled problems across a range of areas from training to funding and recognition to legal liability.

The Director General of Emergency Management Australia and Chair of the Summit Organising Committee, Mr David Templeman, said that the volunteers at the Summit had concluded that the sector is 'simply not well enough recognised' by all levels of government, the community, media and industry, particularly the insurance industry.

## Recognition

Examining the evidence on the expression of national recognition, the volunteers concluded that legal protection was not comprehensive, funding was deficient and training was not consistently applied across Australia.

They recognised that while support was available from the Commonwealth through

EMA to tackle these problems, essentially the action lies with the volunteer organisations themselves and with the proposed National Peak Body.

The volunteers agreed that the solution to this lack of recognition lies not only with all levels of government and the media, but also with the volunteer organisations themselves.

Volunteer organisations needed to develop partnerships with each other, with the media and particularly with local government, so they can take their messages to the community in a more consistent, frequent and informative manner.

## Legal/Protection

The Summit recognised that the level



Director General of EMA, David Templeman, chairs the final session of the Summit at the National Convention Centre in Canberra.

of protection for volunteers is uneven, and in some cases, deficient.

In addition, existing arrangements are not well understood by the volunteers themselves. The problems faced by the volunteers are not well understood by local government or by State and Territory Governments.

The Summit urged all organisations to review the legal risks that their volunteers face and identify deficiencies - both legal and financial. This information should be shared both within and between States and Territories, and legislative amendments and policy developed collectively should be put forward to better support volunteers.

'We need to educate volunteers about their responsibilities and the protection to which they are entitled,' the Summit concluded.

### Training

The volunteers agreed that to comply with Commonwealth and State and Territory policy, all organisations must accept the National Training Framework.

All organisations must educate their staff and volunteers to reinforce the need to implement the National Training Framework.

Volunteers concluded:

- that the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) through the Public Safety Industry Training Advisory Board (PSITAB) should consider the provision of marketing and communication strategies
- The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs and State Departments of Education could broaden the definition of 'trainee'
- volunteer organisations should work with the PSITAB to develop partnerships that support non-registered training organisations
- agencies should be encouraged to build 'bureaucratic shields' that minimise administrative overload.

### Funding

A proposal to form a National Peak Body that would develop strategies for better funding was strongly supported by the Summit.

The volunteers agreed there was a need to develop a methodology to determine the funding requirements of the organisations and their value to the community.

The Summit also agreed that:



Some of the hard work at the Summit was in combining the discussions in each breakout group into a consolidated set of recommendation presented at the plenary session. The eight facilitators and the four presenters (Michael Stringer, Peter Smith, Rick Stone and John Gledhill) formulated the final outcomes in terms of the problems identified and the action required. The Funding facilitators are pictured here with Hori Howard (standing left) coming to grips with the issues.



The Governor-General, Dr Peter Hollingworth meets Ms Rocky O'Brien, Territory Officer with St. John Ambulance Australia, ACT

- adequate funding for protective clothing and safety equipment was fundamental to the safety and well being of the volunteers and sufficient funding must be found
- volunteers should not be financially disadvantaged for volunteering but the volunteers opposed direct payment
- the National Peak Body should examine volunteer employer support programs.

## Volunteers praised by Parliamentary Secretary

The National Summit for volunteer leaders and managers from Australia's emergency management and emergency service organisations began with an enthusiastic opening address from Dr Brendan Nelson MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence.

Speaking to more than 450 volunteers and official guests from across Australia, he officially welcomed the volunteers and formally recognised their commitment and work to various emergency service organisations.

Dr Nelson said 'without Australia's dedicated emergency management volunteers who number more than half a million, communities would be unable to deal with disasters like fires, storms, floods and cyclones'.

'It is both appropriate and timely this year, in the International Year of Volunteers, that we should define the way ahead for volunteers so they will continue to be committed, enthusiastic and available', Dr Nelson said.

Dr Nelson's speech emphasised this year's Summit theme of 'Value Your Volunteers - Or Lose Them'.

'Would we in any sense be a community without those who give up their time and resources in the service of others? Imagine Australia without men and women who selflessly serve us in not only times of natural and technological disasters but in preventing them and cleaning up afterwards', Dr Nelson said.

'I think you have recognised that in a management sense, good intentions and volunteer labour is not enough. I am sure that while most Australians look at emergency services volunteers and breathe a great sigh of relief that you are there... they are probably quite oblivious to many of the issues that you are raising at this summit. Many Australians probably don't realise that you are volunteers.'

'I am thinking here of issues about funding, about legal liability, training and about recognition and rewards. All those have been raised in some detail in the discussion papers issued in advance of this Summit.'

'There are some very good ideas and solutions which you will, no doubt, debate at the Summit. There are ideas about Government tax regimes; about nationally accredited training schemes; about funding; and about audits of legal risk.'

'I recognise that the resolution of these

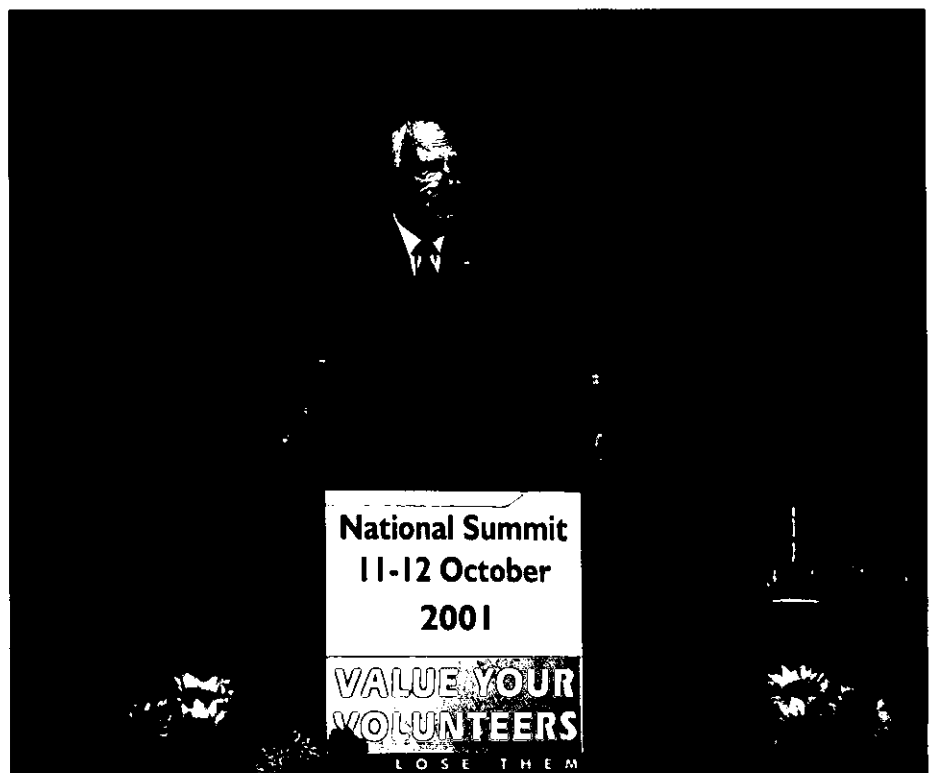
critical management issues will mean the continued development of volunteering in the emergency management sector.'

'Failure to resolve them could well mean a severe dint in volunteer framework that

supports emergency services across Australia. As you've said, probably better than I could, in the slogan title for this summit; Value your volunteers or lose them,' Dr Nelson said.



Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence, Dr Brendan Nelson MP, meets Joe Taylor from Gosnells SES in Western Australia.



The Governor-General, Dr Peter Hollingworth, officially opened the Summit in Canberra on Thursday 11 October.



At the Summit, David Templeman, Director General of EMA; Sue Adams, Captain of the Humpty Doo Volunteer Fire and Rescue Brigade in the Northern Territory and Chris Beer from the NT Fire and Rescue Brigade.



Glen Hall, WA SES; Jon Belmonte, Salvation Army Emergency Service and John Kelly from St Vincent de Paul Society.



From Anglicare NSW, Kay Graves, John Johnstone and Dawn Ferguson.

## DG looks ahead to results

In presenting the Summit outcomes, the Director General of Emergency Management Australia (EMA), David Templeman, posed the question: 'So where to from here?'

He continued: 'My intention would be to have a further Summit of this type in about two years, and to put some rigour in the process so that you can come back here and say, "Well what did you actually achieve; what was done; what did we achieve?"'

'I intend to keep the Summit Steering Committee going, but we may have to look at the composition to see if it needs to be broadened. I don't necessarily want to have a cast of thousands on the committee, but if we need to tweak it to ensure that we get all sectors covered, then we'll do that.'

'EMA is prepared to take strategic leadership. This will ensure that we share the outcomes of this Summit with the Australian Emergency Management Committee at State and Territory levels and so empower them to pass that information down to the community and the local government level.'

'I will be writing to inform Dr Brendan Nelson of the outcomes of the Summit and my suggestion to him will be that he writes to all his Parliamentary colleagues as he did to inform them about this Summit. In a caretaker situation like we're in at the moment, it will also be courtesy that he write to the Leader of the Opposition informing him of the outcomes of the Summit. I have since spoken with Dr Nelson and he is supportive of this approach.'

'So in some respects we have an opportunity to ensure in a truly bipartisan way that all Parliamentarians can actually be informed of the outcomes.' 'We have asked Hori Howard to pull together a major report with the draft expected in mid-November. That report will be then shared with all organisations that have had involvement in this Summit and others. So in a truly consultative, participative way, a final report should be ready in January in 2002.'

'Following the election on 10 November we would expect that the report will be put to Government for consideration.'

'I need your assistance in that process too. Once we have the report that we all jointly own, it needs to actually have your total buy-in and involvement and commitment to the process and the priorities that have been addressed. That will be fundamental to actual achieving the outcomes. In two years time we hope to see things have been done as a result of the recommendations.'