

## FOREWORD

# National Summit for Volunteers in the Emergency Management Sector

*David Winterburn* discusses EMA's achievements since the October 2001 Summit

It is widely acknowledged within the emergency management community that there are growing challenges within the volunteer emergency sector, and that positive action will be required if it is to remain viable in the mid to long term. Recognising this situation, Emergency Management Australia, supported by the Department of Family and Community Services staged the first ever National Summit for the sector with the provocative title of *Value Your Volunteers or Lose Them*.

The Summit, held in Canberra from 11 to 12 October 2001, provided opportunities for volunteers to discuss issues of concern and focused on the four themes of recognition, legislation/protection, training and funding.

Following the Summit, a comprehensive report and Executive Summary was produced. To increase awareness of volunteer issues amongst key stakeholders, both were widely distributed in hard copy and CD Rom. They are also available on the EMA web site.

At the Summit, the participants recommended, as an indication of solidarity with their American colleagues, a display of badges from all emergency management organisations present, be forwarded to the Mayors of New York City and Washington DC.

EMA arranged for the displays to be created and organised their transportation to America. They carried the following message:

*"Australia's emergency management volunteers salute the dedication, professionalism and sacrifice of our American emergency management colleagues in responding to and recovering from the tragic events of 11 September 2001."*

The Australian Ambassador to the USA presented the display to the

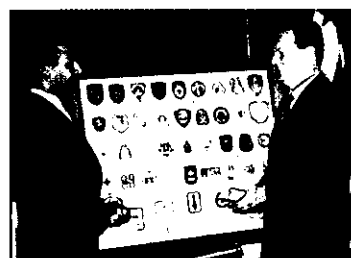
Mayor of Washington and the Australian Consul-General made a similar presentation to the Commissioner of the New York City Office of Emergency Management. Significant media coverage was obtained on both occasions.

One of the main recommendations of the Summit was that a national peak body should be created to represent volunteers in emergency management. Such a body has since been formed and is known as the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum. Its primary purpose is to facilitate better communication between the organisations within it and to provide advocacy for the sector.

At its inaugural meeting held in April 2002, Major General Hori Howard (Retd) was appointed Chairman of the Forum. The Forum is currently reviewing the Summit recommendations to establish the most appropriate means of implementing them.

Having attended the formative meetings of this new group it was pleasing to witness the spirit of cooperation that exists between members who represent a diverse range of organisations. They are all keen to work towards the common goals of ensuring that the volunteer ethos thrives within emergency management and that the volunteers themselves are well trained, protected, resourced and recognised for the excellent contribution they make to the community.

Of further note is the progress that has been made in relation to volunteer issues within the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Review of Disaster Relief and Mitigation. The COAG High Level Group has acknowledged that volunteers are an indispensable part of Australia's emergency management capability. A major milestone



*Ambassador Michael Thawley (R) accepts a gift from DC Mayor, Anthony Williams following the Ambassador's presentation of the EMA shield display to the District of Columbia, 29 May 2002.*

for volunteers will be achieved if the recommendations relevant to them are accepted by COAG.

The National Volunteers Summit was a very significant and successful event. For the first time ever, and especially in the International Year of Volunteers, it brought together volunteers from many agencies around Australia and highlighted some of the current issues of concern to the emergency management volunteer sector.

Since the Summit, considerable progress has been made toward implementing the major recommendations arising from the event. Many of the issues are extremely complex and will require much effort on the part of the volunteers, their agencies and all spheres of government to resolve. Australia has a proud tradition of emergency management volunteerism that is in danger of being slowly eroded. If this tradition is to remain strong, all stakeholders must show how much they value their volunteers by working together to address the issues they have identified.

EMA intends to convene a further Summit for volunteers in 2003 to examine achievements since 2001 and determine future direction.

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