

Volunteerism in emergency management in Australia: directions and developments since the national Volunteer Summit of 2001

By Maj. Gen. Hori Howard

Late in 2001, Emergency Management Australia hosted a *Volunteer Summit* to provide an opportunity for volunteers in the emergency services to get together, discuss their common problems and identify ways of solving them. The Chair of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum, Maj. Gen. B.W. Howard, presented a paper at the *Australian Disaster Conference* in Canberra in September on what has happened since the Summit. This is a lightly edited version of his presentation.

Introduction

The Volunteer Summit organised by Emergency Management Australia in 2001, as Part of the United Nations sponsored International Year of the Volunteer, was as far as I know the first real opportunity for all the major volunteer groups from the emergency sector to come together to discuss common problems. In order to provide some structure to the Summit, the Steering Committee had to come up with some major themes. Those chosen were:

- Recognition
- Funding

- Legal issues (including protection)
- Training

While these themes were set in advance of the Summit, the Steering Committee that decided on them was representative of almost all of the organisations in the volunteer emergency sector, and the Summit included sufficient workshop sessions to allow everyone to be heard. As would be expected, a larger number of sub-themes emerged, particularly recruiting and retention, but overall, the four major themes selected were accepted as being appropriate.

The world of the volunteer emergency sector has moved on since the Summit, and hopefully will move further soon—and in the right direction. So what I would like to do today is to provide you with a report on what is going on, and some thoughts for the future.

Outcomes from the Summit

The majority of the delegates accepted that the four themes encompassed most of the main problems currently faced by government and non-government organisations alike. Many were surprised to discover that the problems across the sector were remarkably similar. The mainstream emergency services discovered that there were organisations in the

sector which were significantly less well off than they were, and there were bonds formed between organisations which have led to better communication and mutual assistance, which continues today.

The attention given to the four themes at the Summit has paid off in many ways. For example it has given all the organisations a focus in their dealings with their State and Territory governments. There has been a degree of consistency of approach that has never been evident previously. There are numerous examples of progress in the areas covered by the themes, which show that the Summit was well worthwhile and should be repeated at some time in the future.

The themes from the Summit have also provided the basis for a section on volunteers in the Report commissioned by the Council of Australian Governments into natural disasters in Australia. This report should be released shortly, and will provide further credibility for our cause.

The Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum

But by far the most significant outcome from the Summit was the formation of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF). The desire for

a national peak body dominated proceedings, and thanks to the support provided by Emergency Management Australia, it has become a reality. The current members are:

- Adracare
- Anglicare
- Australian Assembly of Volunteer Firefighters
- Australian Council of State Emergency Services
- Australasian Fire Authorities Council
- Australian Red Cross
- Australian Volunteer Coast Guard
- Emergency Management Australia (Ex-Officio)
- Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol
- St John Ambulance
- State Emergency Service Volunteer Association
- Surf Life Saving Australia
- Volunteer Ambulance Officers Association
- Volunteering Australia
- Volunteer Rescue Association

The Forum has defined itself as '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 Objectives of the Forum were determined to be:

- To foster communication between emergency service organisations and with the government.
- To share information
- To provide advocacy, particularly on behalf of the non-government members

To focus on recognition, training, legal issues (including protection) and funding.

The Forum has met regularly since the Summit, and is gradually finding its feet. We are trying to

establish ourselves as a responsible and non-threatening partner in the business of volunteerism within the emergency sector. We are taking care to ensure that we are not seen to be interfering in State and Territory business, because at this stage we have no formal acknowledgment from the States and Territories that we have a role, and this will be fundamental to our survival. Hopefully a recent agreement at the Australian Emergency Management Committee that we can provide a brief report to each meeting will help us achieve the recognition we require if we are to play a proper role.

We are currently working on a number of projects. We have recently collected information on what volunteers have to pay for their personal protective clothing and safety equipment, and we are about to work out what it costs to be a volunteer. We will also soon collect details of insurance costs, including who pays the insurance and how much the premiums have increased over the last couple of years. This information has not to my knowledge been collected nationally, and it will provide us with authoritative information on some of the issues that are faced by the sector. We are always looking for suggestions for new projects and would welcome your input.

Recent developments

There have been a number of significant developments in the volunteer emergency sector since the Summit, which have already or will have significant effects on many of the volunteers. The first is of course the insurance debacle. Many of our members do not have their insurance paid by Government, and they have faced real difficulties in providing cover for their organisations and their volunteers. Public liability has been a particular problem. I am pleased to advise that all organisations have been able to obtain the insurance cover they require, but for some it

has not been easy. We consider that Governments have a responsibility here to look after their volunteer organisations if they are an integral part of their emergency management systems.

The other issue is the Charities Definition Inquiry and the proposed new charities legislation, due to take effect in mid 2004. The indication is that the government emergency services could lose their charitable status. This is likely to affect the bush fire services, the state emergency services and the volunteer ambulance services, but there is also a deal of uncertainty amongst some of the other organisations due to the degree of government control which characterises the emergency sector. Government control is of course fundamental to effectiveness in managing emergencies, and the notion that it should be the main criterion in determining charitable status is not logical for the emergency sector.

Because of the requirement for Government control over emergencies, there may be a risk that this approach may extend to the whole volunteer emergency sector. This would of course be disastrous, as I know of no volunteer emergency organisation which is fully funded by government, and which is not required to raise additional money to survive. This is by no means certain at this stage, but it should sound a note of warning to everyone, about how we are viewed by the Commonwealth Government. Our sector has no special status in their eyes, despite occasional claims to the contrary.

We should be conscious of a possible outcome of the progressive integration of the volunteer emergency sector into government service provision. As the range of safety services required by the community has increased, governments have found them increasingly costly to deliver,



so they have been only too happy to accept the services of the volunteer sector. These services are no longer ‘add ons’, but are now core business of governments. The volunteers have generally welcomed this approach, as they feel more relevant. However, the channelling of the spirit of volunteerism to meet government objectives appears to have coloured the way their efforts are recognised. I would argue that they are now being taken largely for granted, and their services are demanded without, necessarily, the proper level of recognition or other support.

The Future

The Forum is seeking membership of a Third Sector (Volunteer) Council, which, we understand, is to be formed under the sponsorship of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. Unfortunately it appears that the organisers of this Council do not want the emergency sector to be represented. However, we will continue to exert pressure, if necessary at political level, to be accepted as a member.

There are encouraging initiatives from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to improve the quality and quantity of information about volunteers. Initially we were excluded from their discussions, but now that they know of our existence we will be included in future.

I mentioned the Council of Australian Governments review of

natural disasters, and the inclusion of the volunteer emergency sector in it. Once the report is released, it will provide us with the opportunity to advise our political leaders of the existence of the Forum, and that we can assist in providing information about the sector from a national perspective. This is the main reason we are currently collecting information.

The Christmas bushfires are worthy of a mention, as they were disastrous, particularly in the ACT. The community reaction was predictable, that is, they needed to blame someone and the emergency services were closest. We should accept that this is normal, and not be too sensitive. We should not expect any concessions because we are volunteers. Those days are over. What was most pleasing was that the ACT and Commonwealth Governments stood by the emergency services in the face of considerable pressure. This is the key, not whether there is criticism or not. The Forum and several individual members called on the government to support their emergency services, and this may have helped. We will certainly be there for all the organisations in future.

Conclusion

The volunteer emergency sector has an integral role to play in the safety and wellbeing of the Australian community, and due to demands for more and better services, is likely to face increasing pressure. If the sector is to be in a position to

respond, there will need to be a complementary improvement in support from governments. Many of the organisations in the sector face serious problems with training, legal matters, (including protection) and funding. However, I think it is fair to say that all organisations suffer from problems of recognition. Many of the services provided by the sector are taken for granted because they are standard government services, and the sector is increasingly being treated as just another arm of government. If this tendency continues and the uniqueness of the contribution of the volunteer emergency sector goes inadequately unrecognised, the extremely high levels of service delivery will not be maintained over the long term.

This situation means that we all have work to do. We must speak with one voice in our efforts to gain proper recognition. If we can achieve this, the rest will surely follow.

We are currently building an interactive website to help you stay in touch. It is at www.emergencyvolunteersforum.org

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