

Australian Rural Fire Services' Recognition and Service Awards for Volunteers

Jim McLennan and Mary Bertoldi examine the use of service awards for volunteerism recognition

Abstract

All Australian rural fire services have recognition and service award schemes for their volunteers. However, there are considerable differences among the eight agencies in the number of recognition opportunities available, the variety of awards available, and the minimum length of service required to qualify for an award. It is suggested that fire services review their recognition and award systems to maximise the effectiveness of these schemes in contributing to volunteer commitment and retention.

Introduction

Australia has a large area, sparse population, and great distances between population centres. It is heavily dependent on volunteer fire fighters to protect vulnerable communities against the threats posed by bushfires (Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2004; Nairn, 2003).

Based on fire services' Annual Reports, there were approximately 220 000 fire service volunteers in Australia's eight volunteer fire services (excluding retained fire fighters, who are remunerated for being on duty) as at June 2004 (McLennan, 2005). Over the past decade, some concerns have been expressed that social and demographic changes, and structural changes in the Australian economy, may threaten the future of volunteer-based emergency services in this country (Adler, 2004; CFA, 2001; Nairn, 2003; Rheinholdt, 1999/2000; Turner, 2004a).

Most volunteer fire services report difficulties in maintaining adequate numbers of volunteers in some regions – especially small rural communities and new housing estates in what were previously rural communities. CFA (2001) reported an annual rate of decline in volunteer membership of about 4.5 per cent over the period 1990–2001. The South Australian Country Fire Service reported that each year, for the previous five years, about 400 more volunteers resigned than joined

(Palmer, 2003). This represents a loss of about 14 per cent of the volunteer membership over the period.

One way to maintain adequate volunteer numbers is to maximise retention of volunteers. Woodward and Kallman (2001) surveyed former Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers about why they had left. McLennan (2004) re-analysed their data and concluded that about one-third of those surveyed had most probably left the organisation because they moved away from the area, while about two-thirds of resignations resulted from some factors other than relocation. Woodward and Kallman's survey data suggest that about one-third of volunteer fire fighter resignations may be unavoidable, leaving about two-thirds amenable to some form of organisational initiatives aimed at maintaining motivation to remain with the agency. At the time of writing, Woodward and Kallman's study was the only published report concerning the reasons why volunteer fire fighters left their organisation¹.

Increasing volunteer retention

There is general agreement among human resources professionals and managers of volunteers that organisational attrition rates can often be reduced by practices that increase members' morale and thus commitment to remaining with their organisation (Bush, Schaenman, & Thiel, 1998; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2004; Jones & May, 1992; Robbins, Cacioppe, Millett, & Waters-Marsh, 2001). Lillenthal (2000, p. 71) offered the following observation in relation to (paid) employee turnover in the United States. "Current research confirms that it is generally not pay, benefits, or dissatisfaction with the job that prompts good employees to leave. In fact, according to the Corporate Leadership Council (www.clcinteractive.com), the vast majority (67 per cent) of employees who intend to leave their organisation are satisfied with their jobs. Rather, employees most often leave because they feel they are not valued."

The importance of volunteers feeling *valued* by their host organisation emerged as a major theme of the first *Emergency Management Volunteer Summit* for

¹ Several agencies are currently conducting surveys of former volunteers about their reasons for leaving the organisation.



NSW RFS volunteers and career staff at a recognition parade in Sydney.

emergency services volunteer leaders and managers held in Canberra in October 2001. The Summit was part of Australia's 2001 *Year of the Volunteer* and resulted in a Summit report titled *Value Your Volunteers or Lose Them* (Emergency Management Australia, 2002). The consensus of the Summit was that practical valuing of emergency services volunteers involved three organisational practices. These are:

- providing opportunities for volunteers to express their opinions and views;
- providing meaningful opportunities for volunteers' personal and professional development; and
- appropriately recognising volunteer contribution to the organisation and the community.

The need for emergency services agencies to value their volunteers was also the focus of the follow-up *2005 Emergency Management Volunteers Summit* (Koperberg, 2005).

Recognition of emergency services volunteers' contributions was one of four key issues addressed during the Summit (the other three were funding, legal protection, and training). Most volunteer fire fighters do incur some losses as a consequence of their volunteering activities which include direct financial expenses, loss of income, loss of time with family, and loss of opportunities for recreation (Conboy, 2004; CFA, 2001; Hourigan, 2003; Nairn, 2003). However, there is general (though probably not unanimous) agreement among fire service volunteer associations that giving direct cash payments to volunteers for the services they provide to their communities would be counterproductive. It would run counter to the commonsense notion

of volunteerism – service to the community, freely given (Gledhill, 2001; Turner, 2004a, 2004b).

It is perhaps noteworthy that a report by the New York State Office of the State Comptroller (Hevesi, 2001) found no evidence that Length of Service Award Programs (LOSAP) contributed to volunteer fire fighter recruitment or retention. LOSAP schemes provide municipally funded pension-like benefits based on an individual's length of volunteer fire fighting service.

The importance of valuing emergency services volunteers by publicly recognising their contributions has been noted by many commentators (e.g., Bush et al. 1998; Gledhill, 2001; Stringer, 2001; Turner, 2004a). We noted that some of these discussions fail to distinguish between recognition in the form of financial rewards, and other forms of recognition not involving financial benefit. In the interests of clarity we recommend distinguishing between agency *incentive* schemes, which involve some form of financial recompense for volunteers, and agency *recognition* schemes, which involve some form of public acknowledgement of the contribution of volunteers in ways other than providing financial benefits.

In the remainder of this paper we examine the recognition and service award schemes currently available to volunteers in Australia's volunteer fire services. Our aim in doing so is to encourage fire service organisations, and their volunteer associations, to review their recognition schemes so that these are as effective as possible in contributing to the retention of volunteers.

Table 1. Rural Fire Service Awards for Volunteers

ACT EMERGENCY SERVICES AUTHORITY	Chief Officer's Commendation for Exemplary Service Service Awards (5–10 years) Diligent Service Awards
N.S.W RURAL FIRE SERVICE	Long Service Badges (15, 25, 35, 50 years) Commissioner's – Medal for Valour Medal for Bravery Commendation for Service Certificate of Commendation
N.T. POLICE, FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES	Fire Service Award Administrators Volunteer of the Year Award (under 25 years of age) Five year certificate Ten year certificate
QLD FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE	Rural Fire Service Certificate of Long Service (10 years of service)
S.A. COUNTRY FIRE SERVICE	Service Awards – Chevron (2 years) Red Star (10 years) Gold Star (20 years) Red & Gold Star (30 years) 2 Gold Stars (40 years) Long Service Awards – Bronze (15 years) Silver (25 years) Gold (35, 45, 50 years) Service Medals – Medal for 7 years diligent service (career staff and volunteers) Service Bars at 10, 15, 20, 25+ years Life Membership (after 20 years) Honorary Membership (after 20 years) Outstanding Service by a Volunteer in the Region Outstanding Service by a Cadet in the Region Chief Officer Commendation Chief Officer Certificate of Appreciation
TASMANIA FIRE SERVICE	TFS Long Service Badges (10, 15, 25, 30 years) Brigade Life Membership Badge TFS Volunteer Award by TVFFAF
VICTORIA COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY	Long Service Badge (Urban Brigades for 12 years of service) Long Service Clasp (Urban Brigades for 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55 years of service) Long Service Lapel Badge (Rural Brigades for 12, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55 years of service) TH Grigg Memorial Achievement Award Valour Medal Outstanding Service Honorary Life Member Retiring Certificate Letter of Commendation Certificate of Appreciation Horrocks Shield
W.A. FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES AUTHORITY	FESA Firefighter of the Year Awards: VFRS, BFS, youth encouragement for a volunteer firefighter aged 16–25 years FESA Outstanding Service Medallion; FESA Commendation VFRS Service Medals (5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55 years service); FS Commendation BFS Medallions (5–10 years service); FS Commendation FESA Units Service Medals (5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55 years service)

Note: The information in Table 1 was provided and checked by the agencies concerned.

Volunteer recognition and service awards: rural fire services compared

All Australian rural fire services provide public recognition and award opportunities for their volunteers. However, an initial examination suggested that there were considerable differences across the eight agencies in both the nature and number of recognition and service award opportunities for volunteers. Early in 2004, as part of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteerism Project, agencies were surveyed concerning their current recognition and services awards schemes for volunteers. The information which was provided is summarised in Table 1. The table does not show Commonwealth or State/Territory awards which are available for volunteers generally, nor does it show unit/brigade recognition awards, nor scholarships and study award opportunities.

Table 1 indicates that rural fire services' recognition and service award schemes differ in three respects. First, the *number* of award opportunities available varies. Queensland Fire and Rescue Service provides only a single award – a Rural Fire Service Certificate of Long Service (10 years). By way of contrast, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (WA) Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service awards Service Medals at five year intervals commencing after five years of service for its Volunteer Fire & Rescue Service and FESA Unit volunteers. Second, the *variety* of award opportunities available varies. All agencies recognise long service, some recognise valour and/or bravery, and a few recognise service activities other than operational firefighting. Third, the *minimum length of service* required for a years-of-service award varies. The SA Country Fire Service provides an award after two years, the NSW Rural Fire Service requires their volunteers to serve for 15 years to qualify for an award.

Discussion

Several rural fire service staff involved with volunteer support and administration provided detailed comments on aspects of the different services' recognition and award schemes. Several commented that the few awards which were not based on length of service were mostly oriented towards bravery or valour. There were few, if any, opportunities for recognising meritorious service in non-operational (or support) roles. A focus on valour, several claimed, sent the wrong message in relation to contemporary emphases on safety and risk-minimisation and failed to reflect the many and varied roles volunteers undertake in the community in addition to fire suppression activity. These activities include community education, fire prevention, and supporting juniors and cadets. Some commented, critically, that fire services generally failed to provide recognition opportunities for their juniors and cadets, notwithstanding the importance of junior and cadet units for ongoing recruitment into senior volunteer roles.

Several volunteer support staff observed that many volunteers served for between five and eight years before resigning. It would be desirable to formally recognise periods of service of two and five years to increase the likelihood of volunteers remaining with the agency and, should they leave, increase their willingness to rejoin in the future if their personal circumstances allowed.

Conclusion

Of course, individual fire services and their volunteer associations have their own unique histories, and their particular award and recognition traditions are derived from those histories. However, it would seem to be prudent for rural fire services and volunteer associations to review their volunteer recognition and service award schemes to ensure they are appropriate for rural fire service volunteering in the context of today's changing



South Australian CFS volunteers in action.

economic, demographic, and social circumstances, and the changing roles of volunteers with emerging emphases on fire prevention, community education, and youth development roles².

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Bushfire CRC Board.

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² Several agencies have foreshadowed reviews of their recognition schemes.



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