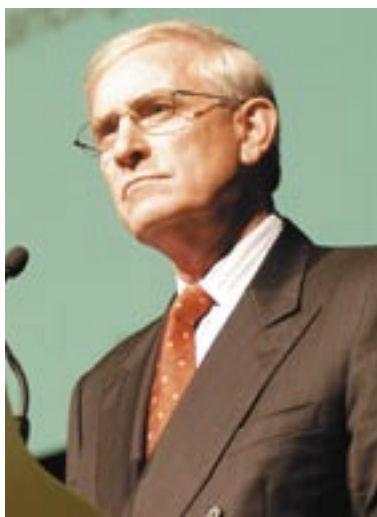


Enhancing links to further benefit volunteers and their communities

Len Foster looks at some of the challenges facing volunteers and the Australian emergency management sector in today's ever-changing and volatile environment



Len Foster presented this topic at the 2005 Emergency Management Volunteers Summit in Canberra.

Introduction

Maintaining and developing two-way linkages with communities and establishing strategic, national perspectives are two crucial factors that will help meet the challenges facing the Emergency Management Volunteer Sector in Australia.

Ten years ago, emergency services volunteer organisations were inward-looking and tactical, rather than future-driven and strategic. The drivers for change identified at the Emergency Management Volunteers Summit in 2001 were tactical in nature and many of the issues are still relevant today. These drivers are:

- community expectations – such as the expectations placed on fire fighters.
- legal matters – such as coronial inquires and occupational health and safety fire-ground and work place safety.
- media scrutiny.
- emergency service events – such as destruction.

- trends to community empowerment – such as recognising that the community is an essential partner.
- changing workforce roles – such as understanding that volunteers offer the same competencies as paid personnel.
- economies of scale – the need to recognise the advantages of emergency service agencies creating strategic partnerships and becoming larger.

For organisations to become strategic there needs to be a national mind set change involving two issues – linkages and scale.

Linkages

To translate social capital, volunteers and volunteer organisations must be directly linked to their communities. Volunteers have the knowledge, skills and are the glue that can enable this link – in other words, volunteers need to become social agents of change.

There are several factors that facilitate linkages. Volunteers are people who have a local identity – they are often well known and trusted on the local scene. They provide and add value. With support, they get recognition and that, in turn, results in increased recruitment and retention.

Volunteers work with the community where linkages are created. Relevancy doesn't just happen. It must be worked for and learnt. To be successful, there must be a relationship with the community and a developed understanding. Emergency Service organisations need to develop

marketing, promotional and lobbying programs to build and maintain that relationship.

Scale

Organisations ignore issues and fight the concept of scale at their peril. The aggregation of the volunteer movement with business strategies creates capacity to make and implement important decisions. Scaling attracts end resources providing linkages to politics, agents and sponsoring bodies. Some major benefits of scaling are:

- better infrastructure;
- integrated service delivery;
- increased effectiveness in adding value;
- increased voice of legitimacy;
- increased communication effectiveness; and
- Shared legal risks.

Creating a corporate body requires an enormous amount of work and significant obligation. If accepted, those organisations have a significant role to support with funds and infrastructure. It also leads to joint decision-making processes and a participatory approach with volunteers. There are a lot of drivers and it is up to us to identify and manage them – it is critical that we value volunteers within our community.

Author

Mr Len Foster AO, is currently CEO of AFAC, a peak body representing fire, emergency services and land management agencies in the Australasian region.