

Islam for fire fighters – A case study on an education program for emergency services

Roberts and Fozdar describe an initiative by the Fire and Emergency Services Authority to build awareness and understanding among emergency services personnel of a diverse community group in Western Australia.

ABSTRACT

Emergency services are increasingly recognizing the need to engage with the diverse communities they serve. In an emergency management context, reciprocal trust based on awareness and understanding is essential during times of natural disasters, emergencies and other catastrophic events. This paper describes an initiative by the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia to build its capacity to deal appropriately with an increasingly visible, and marginalized, minority - the Muslim community- through a program designed to raise awareness and understanding among its staff. Despite some initial internal reticence and broader community criticism, outcomes included raised levels of awareness among FESA members of diversity issues generally, improved knowledge of Islam and related cultural issues, and a number of strong partnerships leading to further community development activities. This paper describes the social, political and organizational context in which the training was developed, and reflects on the personal experiences and lessons learnt by the program developers.

Background

This paper describes an initiative designed to improve the lives of one of Australia's minority communities through raising awareness among emergency services personnel about that community. The community in question is the Muslim community, and the initiative aimed to develop bridges between a government authority and its staff, and this religious minority, through educating those working in the emergency sector to improve their service provision. In a context of overwhelmingly negative stories of racism and discrimination against Muslims, this paper is offered as a positive example of government/community engagement.

The service provider in this case is the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia (FESA), a hazard emergency management and response organisation which deals with fires (rural and urban); hazardous materials incidents (eg. chemical spills); floods; cyclones and severe storms; earthquakes; tsunamis and landslides (FESA 2008). FESA provides combat and support services for marine, land and air searches and rescues; road and rail transport emergencies; and animal disease outbreaks. Aside from geopolitical considerations in the global security context, Australia is vulnerable to disasters arising from natural phenomena. In Western Australia intense cyclones, severe storms and bush fires are frequent. Western Australia is a vast state, with many communities settled in remote and isolated locations which are especially vulnerable due to their remoteness and lack of access to emergency services and facilities.

Emergency management, response and recovery touches the lives of all members of the community. FESA provides advice about preventing or preparing for emergencies, rendering assistance during emergencies and supporting individuals and communities to recover from emergencies and disasters. FESA has some 30,000 volunteers and 1,100 paid staff. It services all parts of the largest state in Australia, including extremely remote Indigenous communities. It also has a community education role, aiming to reduce injury, loss of life and destruction of property through proactive measures. Among its values are putting the community first; respecting and valuing each other; and continuously improving services (FESA 2008). In its efforts to achieve its goal of ensuring a safer community for all, FESA has begun to recognize the need to engage more widely with the diverse population that makes up Australia. This realization is based on an awareness that government instrumentalities that engage with their citizens are better positioned to recognize and accommodate community needs. In response, communities engaged with their governments are more inclined to understand and support government policies.

In an emergency management context, reciprocal trust, i.e. citizens of their government and government of its citizens, is essential during times of natural disasters, major incidents and other catastrophic events

(Yang 2005). Citizens rely on government to provide accurate information, adequate resources and to make decisions which will enhance their safety, wellbeing and protection. The government relies on citizens to accept and comply with information and instructions and to actively support and participate in prevention, preparation, response and recovery efforts. Australia's emergency management policy arrangements are founded upon the principle of shared responsibility where governments and citizens work cooperatively to build safer, more resilient communities (Head 2007).

The effectiveness of this community-centered approach to emergency management is predicated on certain assumptions about the relationship between government and its citizens, namely:

- Reciprocal trust between governments and citizens;
- Shared and informed knowledge about each others' needs;
- Mutual willingness to exchange information; and
- Acceptance of both collective and individual responsibilities.

Engaging and involving citizens can make a substantial contribution to improved community outcomes through the sharing of new information, identifying problems and crafting possible solutions collectively (Walters et al 2000). Participatory citizenship and inclusive public policy is fundamental to combating inequality and social deprivation which contributes to the marginalisation of individuals who may become vulnerable to extremist or radical groups. The emergency management sector is aware that certain groups (low income earners; the very young and very old; the frail or disabled; and the socially or physically isolated) are more vulnerable to, and more profoundly affected by, disasters (Camilleri et al 2007). It also recognises that resilient individuals and communities are more likely to bounce back to pre-disaster level of functionality (Maguire & Hagan 2007).

However the emergency services sector also has a number of potentially limiting characteristics.

FESA was aware of shortcomings within its organisation. For example, its traditional focus on responding to the community in times of crisis or emergency situations means relatively fleeting and isolated contact with individuals, leaving little opportunity, or impetus for, developing meaningful and sustained relationships with those communities. Likewise, like many other emergency service organisations FESA's cultural heritage is founded in paramilitary, hierarchical, regimented, 'command and control' practices, with some elements of FESA originating from a civil defence base. In addition, notwithstanding its varied and expansive field of endeavour, FESA's paid workforce remains largely male mono-cultural and Anglo which is customarily characterised by fairly conservative values and norms. FESA's volunteer workforce is more representative of the wider community in terms of greater participation of women - particularly in the State Emergency Service (SES) volunteer population,

but there is still under-representation of ethnic minorities.

With this awareness, FESA had previously commenced a program of cultural awareness and appropriate service delivery to Indigenous Australians, one of several marginalised groups whose social, political or economic exclusion has meant their civic participation is compromised. In 2007, it also decided to develop on-going relationships with the Muslim community. Western Australia is home to an increasing number of Muslims, including many whose past experiences of uniformed personnel, together with language barriers, cultural differences and stereotyping of Islam make forming partnerships and delivering emergency services challenging. As in most countries, after 9/11 and subsequent events in Bali, Madrid and London, anti-Muslim feeling has registered strongly in attitude polling in Australia, with results indicating that Muslims are considered to be outsiders who do not belong in Australia (Dunn et al 2004; HREOC 2004; Issues Deliberation Australia 2007). Reported incidents of religious vilification and discrimination against Muslims are on the increase and there is a trend towards the culturalisation of crime and criminalisation of culture (Salek & Imtoul 2007; Humphrey 2007; Poynting 2006; Poynting and Mason 2007). Muslims are increasingly being targeted as a threat to social cohesion (Jupp and Nieuwenhuysen 2007).

This is primarily because Australian identity, despite decades of multicultural policies and rhetoric, is often seen by its population as fundamentally white and Christian (Larbalestier 1999; Hage 1998). Illustrating the popular strength of this conviction, Goot and Watson (2005) report that to be considered 'truly Australian', 58 per cent of a representative sample of Australians believe that one must be born in Australia; 37 per cent that one must have Australian ancestry; and 36 per cent that one must be Christian. In a 2007 study (Issues Deliberation Australia 2007) one third of a representative sample of Australians reported that they think Muslims make Australia a worse place to live, 35 per cent believe Muslims threaten to change the Australian way of life, culture and values, 48 per cent that Muslims have a negative impact on Australia's social harmony and national security, one in four (26 per cent) believe migrants should dress like other Australians. It has been argued that such attitudes were fomented over the last few years by a conservative government which encouraged Australians to think of Muslims and their values as alien and threatening social cohesion (see Tilbury 2007; Jupp, 2002; Dunn et al, 2007).

Yet Australia sees itself as a country that has moved beyond its racist origins (Jupp, 2002). Legislation in the 1970s was designed to guard against racial discrimination in immigration policies, employment and other local practices. For example, the Australian Racial Discrimination Act (Commonwealth, 1975) entitles Australian residents to equality of access to facilities, housing, and provision of goods and services, as well as access to employment. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship website contains a section celebrating



Representing the on-going work of the project to improve cultural awareness among emergency services and knowledge among CaLD communities are Farida Fozdar, Suelten Shea from FESA and Michael O'hara from Metropolitan Migrant Resource centre plus two members of the Resource Centre (one from Iraq, one from Sudan).

Australia's diversity (DIAC, 2008a), that acknowledges the need for culturally appropriate engagement with Australia's minority populations. It covers initiatives such as the 'Living in Harmony' program, that seeks to promote social cohesion and address issues of racial, religious and cultural intolerance through funding community projects. To target issues of inclusion, particularly the exclusion of Muslims as a legitimate part of the community, DIAC has undertaken a number of measures, including a 'National Action Plan to Build Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security' (DIAC 2008b).

With regard to the current project, two key aspects of this broader policy environment influenced FESA's cultural diversity priorities and initiatives. These were the recognition that response is not enough – contemporary emergency management places increasing emphasis on building community resilience to prevent, prepare and recover from emergencies and natural disasters. This demands a partnership approach that requires emergency service organisations to engage more meaningfully with communities. Secondly, overlaying the specific emergency management policy is the West Australian Government's Substantive Equality Framework and governmental imperatives for FESA to articulate and demonstrate how it is engaging with, and is inclusive of, culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) communities.

Like most mainstream Australians, FESA staff knew little about Islam, but were perhaps unusual in that they recognised this lack of knowledge. Staff were concerned, for example, that they could not go onto the grounds of a mosque should they need to rescue people after an earthquake (a complete misconception), and were uncertain how to treat Muslim women in the event of an emergency where physical contact might be necessary. A recent incident where a suburban grass fire had threatened an Islamic college had prompted local fire crews to recognise not only the need to engage with the school about fire safety, community warnings and alerts, but also a broader need for

cultural awareness and engagement. An SES unit located in a suburb that is home to a refugee settlement service wanted to talk to new arrivals, many of whom were Muslims from Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan, about the hazards and emergency services in their community but were unsure how to go about it. Fearful of committing insult or offence from clumsy attempts to establish relationships, the unit elected not to pursue this opportunity. Operational staff working on Indian Ocean Territories to the north of WA (Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) Islands, with 10 per cent and 80 per cent of their populations Muslim respectively) and in Indonesia also recognised the need to be more informed about the beliefs and practices of Muslims. Other triggers included the fact that FESA's community education and engagement staff were keen to form relationships with the Muslim community, especially in delivering key community safety messages and recognised that they needed help to build their understanding of Islam and their ability to connect with Muslim community leaders. FESA's Volunteer and Youth Support team saw the potential to increase the diversity of volunteers, but lacked the confidence to make forays into the Islamic community. In sum, pressure was increasing from operational staff wanting to engage with Muslim communities in their regions.

While intuitively FESA understood that it was important to improve awareness and inclusiveness, generally speaking, apart from the Muslim stereotypes portrayed in the mass media, there was limited knowledge of what it meant to be a Muslim in Australia. Negative images portrayed in the mainstream media were in many instances, the principal reference point for FESA personnel understandings of Islam and Muslims (Aly 2007, Celermajer 2007).

The goal of FESA was to work towards social inclusion by connecting with the Muslim community and raising awareness within their own ranks of issues for Muslim Australians. However, whilst feedback about the need to develop organisational understanding of Islam was reasonably consistent, it had come from relatively isolated sources. It was considered appropriate to canvas the extent of the demand for this type of information.

An expression of interest (EOI) was circulated to all FESA staff via the organisations' intranet to ascertain the level of interest in running professional development activities designed to improve understandings of Islam. The EOI generated polarised responses among the membership. Those against it recruited the attention of a high profile Perth radio personality. The DJ was derisive, criticising the workshop as divisive and of little relevance to emergency service personnel (Sattler 2007). Inviting comment on talk back radio, DJ Howard Sattler stated: *"You might want to react to this, talking about Fire and Emergency Services, somebody has sent me this, and they have said, "Enjoy your show, this c-r-a-p was on our website this morning, what do you think"?"*. Negative discussion ensued.

Further correspondence was received by FESA which challenged the need to conduct this activity, since 'standard operating procedures' (SOPs) were applied

equally to all people, irrespective of nationality, race or religious beliefs. This sentiment was echoed by other staff who voiced their concern about the workshop. From their perspective, if people wanted to come to Australia they needed to embrace 'Australian values' and the 'Australian way of life' and there was no room for alternate religious or cultural practices in Australia. One argued: *"Why do I need to know anything about someone's religious beliefs? I am saving lives - I treat everyone the same"*. A station officer wondered why Muslims had been singled out: *"...Having discussed this topic with FRS at XXX, XXX and XXXX fire stations the same question keeps arising that I am unable to answer. Why does FESA single out 1 group only in this workshop? Fire fighters deal with all people equally. Nationality, race or religious beliefs do not effect our SOP's...all the public we come into contact with deserve to be, and in fact are treated the same"*.

On the other hand, messages of support and encouragement were also received, with personnel recognising the value and benefit of attending the activity. In light of the negative (if isolated) feedback, there was some reflection on the merits and risks of proceeding with the workshop. Nonetheless it was considered that there was sufficient interest in the issue to warrant running the activity.

Designing the workshop

The 'Understanding Islam in Australia' workshops aimed to build participant knowledge about Muslim Australians in particular and Islam more generally, as a precursor to enabling emergency service personnel to engage with Muslims in a culturally appropriate manner. The broad approach taken to developing the workshop was that of 'cultural awareness training', an approach that teaches people about different cultures to raise knowledge, understanding and empathy, but that runs the risk of homogenising and essentialising culture (Hollinsworth 2006: 275). It was therefore coupled with a 'social justice' approach, which sought to make participants aware of their own cultural baggage, within a context that emphasised fundamental human rights (including the right to access services and resources) and the dignity of all. It also included a 'racism awareness' component, to ensure that participants had the tools to challenge the negative stereotypes and fear-mongering prevalent in the media and elsewhere. Being aware that the prejudices and stereotyping that leads to racist beliefs and actions can be decreased by challenging false beliefs, encouraging empathy between peoples, providing opportunities for dialogue about racial issues and encouraging interaction between people of different groups (see Pederson et al. 2005), the workshop was designed both as an opportunity for information provision, and an intervention to challenge stereotypical preconceptions through the processes Pettigrew (1998) identified (i.e. changing people's knowledge, behaviour, emotional reactions, and challenging their definitions of their group identity) to become more inclusive.

A partnership was formed between the two authors of this paper, one (Roberts) in charge of community development within FESA, the other (Fozdar) a sociology and community development academic at a local university. Fozdar had offered an intensive unit as part of a sociology degree, open to the public as well as students, 'Islam, Terror and Multiculturalism' in an attempt to encourage more informed debate about issues of religion and integration. Roberts considered the unit had the potential to be adapted to suit the needs of the emergency service organisation. The benefit of using the university, from FESA's point of view, was that the professional development activity could be branded in such a way as to appear non-partisan - this was not training undertaken by a Muslim organisation nor by FESA itself, but by an independent and prestigious educational organisation. Certification of participation in the training provided participants with tangible evidence of their involvement.

A pilot one-day workshop was devised, combining theory, practice and personal experience, geared for emergency service personnel. The workshop aimed to provide emergency service workers with some practical skills and advice that would equip them to work with Muslims in a culturally respectful manner including managing cultural considerations under emergency conditions.

Workshop content

The initial workshop introduced participants to some of the beliefs and customs of Islam and the history and practices of Muslims in Australia. It aimed to improve cultural sensitivity in interaction with Muslims and help participants understand some of the myths and misconceptions regarding the Muslim community in Australia. This involved identifying how racism works, and its effects. To provide a broader context for the discussion, policy issues related to multiculturalism and democratic freedoms were covered. To avoid ignoring 'the elephant in the room', issues around terrorism and cultural difference were covered. The content included identifying important local Muslim figures, key practices, language, prayer, festivals, personal habits, modesty, food, birth, death, marriage, greetings, family and community decision-making protocols, and differences between culture and faith. This information was customised to explore how these considerations can interact with emergency workers in the course of their work.

Participants were encouraged to consider their own cultural influences by reflecting on Carr-Ruffino's (1999) typology of the influence of culture. Carr-Ruffino suggests all people learn the following from their culture: How to interact with the environment; how to associate with others; how to organize society; how to meet survival needs; how to think/learn/interpret; how to use space and time; how to play; how to defend ourselves; and how to use things (money, house, furniture, technology etc). Reflecting on one's own cultural influences makes one much more open to

recognizing that all people, not just the 'ethnics', are immersed in culture.

A broad outline of information about Muslims in Australia was provided – that 1.7 per cent of the Australian population are Muslim, that over a third are Australian-born, and 80 per cent are Australian citizens (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a). To challenge the notion of a homogenous community with a single culture, it was pointed out that Muslims in Australia come from 70 different countries, in regions which include the Middle East, Russia, Europe, Indian subcontinent, Africa, South East Asia, China, and, particularly in WA, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Languages spoken by Muslims include English, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Malay, Bosnian, Tamil, Croatian, Spanish and Maltese. Next to Buddhism, Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in Australia, with a higher growth rate in Western Australia in the last decade (92 per cent compared to 69 per cent). Many of WA's Muslims are refugees from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007b). For many of these refugees, past experiences with men in uniform in their countries of origin are associated with fear, corruption and violence. This may affect responses to emergency services workers. There are significant Muslim populations living in regional WA, including locations vulnerable to bushfires and cyclones such as Katanning, Geraldton, Newman and Port Hedland. It was also pointed out that Indonesia, one of Australia's closest neighbours and the site of recent events requiring Australian emergency service workers' assistance (the Bali bombing 2002; the tsunami 2004; the Java earthquake 2006), is home to the world's largest Muslim population.

The workshop sought to combine theory with practice, bringing together academic sessions with sessions led by local Muslim leaders (male and female) who could share first hand their personal experiences of being an Australian Muslim and humanise the stereotypes. This was also important given that few participants had ever met a Muslim. Speakers were selected on the basis of their ability to respond to the most provocative and probing questions from workshop participants.

On the practical side, participants were encouraged to discuss a number of brief case studies and identify issues of culture and religion which could present themselves in each, and consider how they would deal with each situation. Scenarios included the following:

- A dangerous bushfire is approaching an Islamic school (consider issues for primary vs secondary school)
- You are searching for missing persons at sea – a group of Somalis who went fishing and whose boat capsized. The adult children are not practicing Muslims but their parents are.
- You have been asked to respond to and investigate a fatal house fire at an Iraqi Muslim home. There were no smoke alarms, and early indications are that the fire started from faulty electric blanket. The home is protected by lots of security,
- Your section has a new colleague who is an Indian Muslim.
- An elderly Muslim widow from Iran with a disability is lost in bushland. She does not speak English, and her adult children only have basic English
- There has been a hazardous material spill at a Bosnian business. You notice a lack of compliance with storage of dangerous substances and maintenance of emergency exits.
- A highly toxic plume is approaching the Kampong area on Cocos Island.
- There is a forecasted severe tropical cyclone to cross land a medium sized regional town in 4 days time. FESA wants to door-knock households in the predicted impact area to give advice about pre cyclone safety messages to families. You are aware the community includes a number of Muslim families from Malay backgrounds (Fozdar, 2007).

Feedback from the initial workshop resulted in a number of changes to the program including: highlighting the differences between culture and faith; reflecting on the similarities between Islam and Christianity and other faiths; how emergency service workers would deal with Muslims in both emergency and non-emergency situations; catering for the role technicians and logistical experts may take in overseas deployments; Islam in Indonesia, Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) Islands; and providing helpful information about peak bodies, key contacts, reference material/publications, locations of significant Muslim populations or places, and so on.

Despite the initial reservations, the workshops were well supported by FESA personnel and other colleagues in the emergency and State Government sector. Over 60 people responded to the initial expression of interest, with 48 people attending the pilot workshop and 31 attending the second workshop including personnel from the Australian Red Cross and Department of Industry and Resources – International Trade Unit. Participants included on-shift station fire fighters, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) specialists, district managers, State Emergency Services personnel, volunteers, community education and engagement officers, corporate staff, HR and recruitment staff, and training officers.

The workshops were generally well received. According to evaluation reports (response rate 63 per cent): 96 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that the content of the workshop was relevant to their interests and concerns, both as an individual and as an employee of FESA; 92 per cent agreed/strongly agreed the workshop was relevant to their vocational/professional needs; 94 per cent agreed/strongly agreed they were actively engaged in learning; 84 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that they felt motivated to learn more about the subject; 98 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that in the workshop they were encouraged to respect one another's values and beliefs; and 96 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that it helped them develop a greater awareness of cultural and social issues. Qualitative comments from the evaluation reports included:

"I had very little knowledge of Islam, only what I have heard thru the media, which I know can be very biased and untrue at times. It was great to hear the

'truth' about their beliefs and ideals, and to see that they are very similar to Christianity and basic beliefs of all people! Thank you".

"Any misconception I had about Islam, Muslims have been dispelled completely. I have a deeper understanding of all aspects".

"For myself as a fire fighter the areas of important customs was interesting for use at incidents and every day work – dispelled myths."

"Better understanding of issues raised in the media".

"More awareness of their religion. Therefore I will be more empathic to their views."

"Stereotyped beliefs were totally wiped away".

"I will be less likely to pigeon hole a particular group/ religion or so quick to judge the actions of a few as representing those of the majority. Thank you or should I say "Shukran – Asalam Alikum".

Discussion and conclusion

The collaboration between FESA and Murdoch University in adapting what was a very comprehensive full unit academic program into an interactive, practical one day workshop for emergency service workers has forged an enduring association which has continued into other areas of work.

With seed funding provided by Emergency Management Australia (EMA), as part of the 'National Action Plan for Building Social Cohesion', FESA is currently working with Murdoch University, other service providers and community groups on a project to engage Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities in emergency management. This is the WA arm of a nationwide strategy. FESA is also undertaking a survey of the level of cultural diversity of its statewide committee structure, to provide baseline data to be compared to the level of inclusion after the EMA funded initiative.

Aside from the personal and professional development as indicated by participant feedback, other organisational outcomes of this initiative have included raising the profile of FESA with Muslim community leaders; fire fighters committing to conducting community visits to their local mosque or Islamic college; presentation of this initiative at a number of national diversity conferences; and one of the Muslim guest speakers becoming an emergency service volunteer for the Australian Red Cross. Perhaps the most important outcome however, is that it provided tangible evidence of FESA's commitment to engage with a CALD community.

From the point of view of the academic involved, the program was an opportunity to engage in a very practical activity to enhance social inclusion and raise understanding about multiculturalism generally, and Islam specifically. While astonished at the general lack of knowledge, the level of goodwill in terms of openness in considering their own cultural influences, in challenging their own stereotypes, and in seeking to understand more about another culture, gave the academic real hope for the future of multicultural Australia, particularly in the context of such widespread

negativity post 9/11. The vocal resistance by a very small minority notwithstanding, outcomes were extremely positive.

At the outset of this paper it was noted that this was a 'top down' initiative – one that came from government rather than the Muslim community themselves. However, it is clear that the initiative was designed as a means to empower 'the consumer' (Twelvetrees, 1991), through raising levels of awareness and understanding of the service provider about not only a specific community's needs related to the service they provide, but the general level of understanding about that minority. It applied community development principles such as empowerment, respect for diversity, social justice, a recognition of both citizenship rights and general human rights, and improving accessibility to a particular human service (Kenny 2007). As such it reflects Twelvetrees' advice that "The central ideas (of community development) are not unique to community work. Indeed, good management, industrial relations, relations between family members, and relations between all professionals and consumers need ... to reflect this ethos if they are to be effective" (Twelvetrees, 1991: 13). The Understanding Islam program is a practical example of how a partnership between a service provider and an educational institution, drawing on the assistance of members of a marginalised community themselves, can reflect such an ethos. As a result, the stage has been set for meaningful direct engagement between the service and the Muslim community of Western Australia.

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