

## **A Strategic Discussion Paper- by Anonymous**

### **'With a position of Presumed Incompetence – Is there really a future for volunteers?'**

Western Australia currently benefits from having a large number of emergency service volunteers, currently augmenting a relatively small number of career emergency service officers. Together they work to support their communities across a very large geographic jurisdiction. The community of Western Australia has traditionally provided the ready volunteer workforce to assist with its own resilience, through the provision of volunteer State Emergency Service (SES) Units, Fire and Emergency Service (VFES) Fire and Rescue Service (VFRS) and Fire Service (VFS) Brigades, as well as Marine Rescue Groups (VMRS). This is almost exclusively the situation within regional areas of the State. DFES also has some influence with the Local Government Bush Fire Brigades (BFB). As the focus of this paper relates to DFES and Local Government emergency service entities, it does not include any discussion with respect to Police, Ambulance, nor other agencies utilising volunteers.

The three million population of Western Australia funds these operations, which involves approximately 1200 full time emergency service staff, complimented by some 25,000 volunteers. So clearly with having these volunteers, the cost of the provision of the emergency services to the State is greatly reduced, through this amount of relatively free labour. This saving is due to the provision of the volunteer's time and energy (including response, training and professional development time), for no financial cost. The State has only to fund the cost of equipment and resources only. For the SES and the BFBs this funding is derived through the Local Government Grant Scheme, levied upon local government rate payers.

The driver for community members to give up their time to assist within their communities, is a legacy of the long-standing culture of volunteering. This is a fortunate historical phenomenon within this State. This culture should not be taken for granted, within a currently increasing tension of decreasing personal free time, coupled to the increasing employment-related tensions, related to volunteers seeking to be released from their employment for emergency response activities.

Volunteer numbers are on the decline, as the 'books' demonstrate less people participating as 'formal' volunteers. When coupled to an organisational reluctance to engage 'spontaneous' volunteers, due in the main, to occupational health and safety and insurance concerns, it is not difficult to become concerned about the ongoing efficacy of this model. This must lead to an increasing, but somewhat invisible, decay in community capacity to manage the impacts of emergencies, especially in regional and rural areas.

Anecdotally, average retention rates within many BGU have declined dramatically. Many SES Units, for example, can no longer claim average Unit member retention rates measured in decades of service. Rather these days, these appear to be measured in single years of experience. Given that it can take several years of volunteering to reach the advanced operational competence, which enables effective response and also the capacity to mentor other volunteers, it would be required to have a significant proportion of BGU membership to be around for at least ten years. These appear to be the people that we are currently losing. Any

diminishing of BGU capacity to undertake their defined roles has to be considered a corporate and societal risk. Without strong retention rates amongst our volunteer BGUs, this is a likely result.

While on face value, recruitment is a treatment to this unfortunate trend and with recruitment the numbers may appear to remain somewhat reasonable, this needs to be considered a risky approach. Replacing a dis-enfranchised seasoned, well experienced volunteer with a new recruit, shows a 'bum on a seat', however this has arguably led to an alarming decline in general emergency task-related competence across the workforce, as experience is replaced with new inexperienced recruits.

This paper seeks to illuminate the areas presumed to be issues of prime concern, with regards to the efficacy of the current volunteer operating environment. In addition, it seeks to highlight the tensions leading to the increasing loss of our experienced volunteer cadre. These salient issues are:

1. The importance of recognising existing volunteer competency (irrespective of agency, or source of competency),
2. The increasingly draconian training and competency maintenance requirements,
3. The apparent reluctance to use local knowledge/experience of local volunteers, within incident management teams, during major local emergencies, and
4. An apparently diminishing organisational interest in truly valuing and respecting our volunteers, their time, experience, commitment and their local knowledge.

## 1. Recognition of existing competency

The fact that an emergency service operator is a volunteer, is no reason to automatically assume that that person is less able to possess a competency, nor undertake a role that requires a competency that they possess. A competency that is formally acquired is equal to any similar competency to the same skills framework standard, irrespective of its source. That is a basic natural justice standard. Having the word 'volunteer' on a shoulder patch should be irrelevant in any decision to assigning roles.

The only sustainable challenge would be related to any competency maintenance requirements, that may or may not have been subsequently completed to the standard required for that specific competency. It could be argued that the parent agency has the bulk of the responsibility to manage the environment which encourages this skill maintenance to occur.

The Australian Skills Framework details these requirements against each of the Units of competency within its scope. Clearly, one effective method would be to work within the operating environment, encouraging the supplementary experience and skills maintenance activities required to maintain currency. Any such activity (operational, or weekly maintenance training, for example) that may have occurred, should be considered in any competency maintenance decision-making. Industry, generally, accepts this option through professional development points or similar.

Competence is the creed of the technocrat who makes sure the gears mesh but doesn't for a second understand the magic of the machine.

**George H. W. Bush**

## 2 Training Currency Maintenance Requirements

A volunteer, similar to any DFES staff member, must work to acquire occupational competencies, to enable them to undertake their work effectively and safely. It is recognised that with some formal competencies, that extinction of learning is a threat to ongoing operational preparedness and safety. It must also be recognised that throughout the year, a volunteer must practice these skills informally, through maintenance training as well as with responding to operational incidents. Rather than a volunteer receiving a draconian advisory email from the DFES eAcademy, indicating an extinction date for an acquired competency, would it not seem more reasonable for any decision-making tool to consider routine on-the-job application, to demonstrate ongoing competence? These experiences should be able to be used to demonstrate that competence remains. These examples would also indicate ongoing, post training experience, which should add value to the capacity of the individual to respond.

It would be better to not just assume that it has been X years since competency acquisition (or the last formal challenge test) and that therefore, the competence level must have subsequently diminished. Effort should be made to develop and implement a system that enables this experience to be captured and used to maintain currency for volunteers. We should not be content to use the current situation whereby some unknown 'person' or 'system' is automatically assuming incompetence and therefore, advising the volunteer that that competency will expire. Some of these credentials (Nationally accredited training for example) do not belong to DFES, so the question must be asked as to what right DFES has to unilaterally 'extinguish' these.

Currently, a message from the eAcademy advises the volunteer that they have a period of time to find a way to be re-assessed in a competency, to retain that currency. It appears that the only rationale for that message is a time/date condition within an automated system, or the absence of any formal eAcademy records to demonstrate the volunteer had been involved in formal delivery of a training product (for trainer/Assessors). It does not recognise the times that that volunteer may have used that competency operationally, nor used it to deliver training in that competency within the BGU environment. To assume incompetence, using the present 'time-since-training' basis is not consistent with the intent of the National Skills Framework and its philosophies.

It is argued that this model of '**presumed incompetence**' is simply a way for DFES to transfer any corporate risk to the individual volunteer operator, while also requiring reduced DFES resources. That is, this saves the organisation from any requirement to work with the volunteer entities, to collect ongoing evidence. This is in no way consistent with the thoughts of the volunteers, who provide free labour operationally and also, in acquiring the required competencies in the first place. Is it any wonder that an experienced operator (often with decades of operational experience, on top of the acquired formal competencies) walks away? Certainly, with the scope of competencies required of an SES volunteer, these eAcademy expiration messages are now coming thick and fast!

In other words, a nameless individual is saying to an experienced volunteer, who has tirelessly supported their (and increasingly other) community/s for decades, that they

are not believed to be responsible enough to keep themselves vocationally current. On top of that, they are then to be burdened with another time impost, a challenge to demonstrate that they retain some value to the organisation.

To arrest the increasing disenfranchisement of our senior and most experienced volunteers (our mentors, trainers, officers, leaders) which is leading to their exodus, some consideration needs to be taken to how they may again feel respected and empowered. Something should be done to ensure that they are not feeling that they are some 'commodity', one that requires regular, scheduled oil changes. Let their routine competency development activities be considered as sufficient evidence of ongoing competency maintenance. Where possible, mentoring, peer review opportunities should be encouraged organisationally, irrespective of the voluntary or career status of the individual.

A supplementary question – what ever happened to the use of the weekly training 'Log-Books' as an official evidence source?

**I have no idols. I admire work, dedication and competence.**

**Ayrton Senna**

### **3 Inclusion of Local Volunteers within IMT**

Increasingly (and it appears to be becoming widespread) during emergency response, DFES move into a community and displace local talent with paid staff. Routinely, throughout the year, local volunteers sit on LEMCs and other networking groups, they know their people, their risks, local areas of vulnerability and their communities look to them, for support in a crisis. When they are displaced during an emergency, they are essentially discounted as a viable support to that event. This robs an IMT of local knowledge, including those attributes of understanding the community and local relationships, mentioned above. Research indicates that over the past two decades, this is exactly the opposite of the approach recommended by various inquirers, reported within major incident reviews, nationally. In one recent event, a Local Manager who was displaced by an incoming DFES IMT, had to attend community meetings to get sufficient situational awareness of what was occurring in their town. This was done to answer queries from community members and agencies who knew that person. Local contacts felt the need to make that contact to get incident information. As that person was no longer involved in the incident management, the community meeting was the only available source.

Additionally, it sends a profound message to the seasoned volunteer that they are not considered worthy of inclusion within an IMT, to assist within their own community. Whereas, at the very least, these events would serve as a brilliant mentoring opportunity. The community may well also wonder why this person was not involved, questioning the Officer's competence into the future.

The home BGU also feels undervalued, as the structure that they have grown to understand and respect is put aside, to be replaced by strangers. Often their 'homes' are taken over by the IMT and associated structures.

The question then remains, how are local people ever going to acquire and then maintain the required competencies to manage emergency events, if they are routinely displaced by career officers from another location? Additionally, how can this be justified where the displaced officer had already acquired the required competency/s and had significant vocational experience to maintain contemporary with the required skills/knowledge (including the routine DFES re-accreditation activities). Clearly, this is a case of 'volunteer? Yes, then remove and replace'. No action was taken to examine any existing competence – it was simply that title on the DFES arm patch – 'volunteer'.

Again, this is doing little to arrest the increasing departure, of experienced volunteer experience from the organisation.

#### **4 Value our Volunteers to Attract, Recruit, Develop and Retain them.**

It is widely understood that our volunteers exist through active altruism, they do not seek financial reward, they do not expect formal thanks from the public.

They are driven to help their communities cope with preparing for, preventing, responding to and also to recover from emergency events. They do not do what they do for DFES, nor the State, nor any other government body. It would appear to be an informal contract between themselves and their local community, to provide what they can, where they can, at their own personal cost. Increasingly, they also extend this good will to other communities, including inter-state, where they see how other entities treat their volunteers.

With the WA SES volunteer, they also see the declining SES brand recognition within their own community of WA, especially if they have travelled to volunteer inter-state where that brand is strongly recognised within community.

When a parent agency starts to disenfranchise and disempower these dedicated individuals, the rationale and drive for that informal community contract is greatly diminished. It is seen as a distraction and an impediment to them continuing to volunteer. Continuing to volunteer just gets harder.

An automated message to advise a volunteer that one of their competencies is going to be extinguished, due simply to some external and ignorant 'time clock', cannot be construed to be supportive and consistent with valuing and respecting our volunteer people.

The only way to arrest the flood of exiting experience along with its intellectual capital, is to value-add the driver that attracts and retains our volunteers. It is important to recognise that there is a real cost to the volunteers, being their commitment, time and discomfort and that should be respected and upheld as worthy of note. That informal contract that they have to their community should become the centre-piece of how DFES treats their volunteer workforce. No matter how insular a paid officer, or organisational leader, may be they must understand that they cannot be everywhere across this State, at all times. Nor do they work within the regional and remote communities, in the prevention and preparation space. Volunteers are critically important, as they do participant in this domain.

The volunteering culture that WA has enjoyed historically, should not be taken for granted either, for the sake of any industrial, or financial expediency. The genesis of that culture occurred in a time where community knew its survivability depended upon mutual support and this support was widely practiced. With the modern environment of two-income families, FIFO work patterns and increasing commercial difficulty for employers to release staff, it is becoming harder to be an emergency service volunteer. If this culture is further eroded, the environment to re-establish such a thing into the future may no longer exist.

To retain our people, would require the reestablishment of an environment which recognises their effort, their competence, their local knowledge and their connections to community. They need and deserve recognition and to feel that being a volunteer does not necessarily make them inferior to the remainder of the emergency service fraternity. If they possess a formal competency, or a practical skill, they earned it, the same as any other operator. Except that is, that they did it in their own time, at their own cost and for altruistic (not career advancement) reasons. Accept nothing less, or except a world without our experienced and capable volunteers.

We may appear to have a sustainable volunteer workforce on paper, if the only metric is 'bums on seats'. However, any new bums are not valuable without the accrued wisdom of veterans of many years, staying on to provide mentorship and guidance to these recruits of (arguably) now inferior training programs. A competent workforce is more than a collection of training program graduates.

**Recognise competence** – irrespective of source, agency, or employment status. If the organisation seeks/needs mechanisms to mitigate some associated corporate risk, don't go straight to the 'burden the volunteers' option. Provide a better way, a way that celebrates voluntary competency maintenance (including recognising vocational practice and ongoing training activities). Don't just assume that the volunteers are not professional enough to be working to maintain the competency that they worked so hard to attain.

**Empower volunteers** to do their job and reduce what they see as unnecessary impediments. Don't just shift them out of the way, when a significant emergency occurs in their community. Use them and involve them, their skills, their networks and their accrued knowledge effectively in the campaign.

Find ways to **celebrate the volunteers** and their parent agency within their community. Listen to their motivators and incorporate these into the messaging. Improve the 'branding' of the individual agencies within DFES, so that they feel that they belong to a credible and respected locally-focussed organisation, one which embraces volunteers as a viable and credible emergency service agency.

**Actively embrace volunteers into the agency** and encourage the agency to recognise that they have real value (not just saved wage costs). This would include managing any elements within DFES that show little respect for volunteers and have a mindset that they are a danger to the agency, then demonstrating active discrimination against them