



SES in Western Australia, helping address Climate Adaptation

« To support the volunteers who support their communities, it is necessary for a reinvigorated framework that contributes to meeting the challenges of a changed environment »

SES Volunteer's Association of Western Australia, Incorporated

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Acknowledgements

The SES Volunteer's Association of Western Australia (SESVA-WA) would like to thank all State Emergency Service (SES) units in Western Australia (WA) who participated in workshops, and discussions since 2022 in the formulation of this Supporting Paper.

Acknowledgement of Country

The SESVA acknowledges the Traditional Custodians throughout Western Australia and their continuing connection to the land, waters, and community. We pay our respects to all members of the Aboriginal communities, their cultures, and to Elders past and present.

Purpose

This Paper sets out the SESVA-WA's position on behalf of the SES units on community empowerment and the future of SES in WA at a time when the WA Government is proposing to consolidate the current emergency services legislation into one Consolidated Emergency Services (CES) Act in 2025.

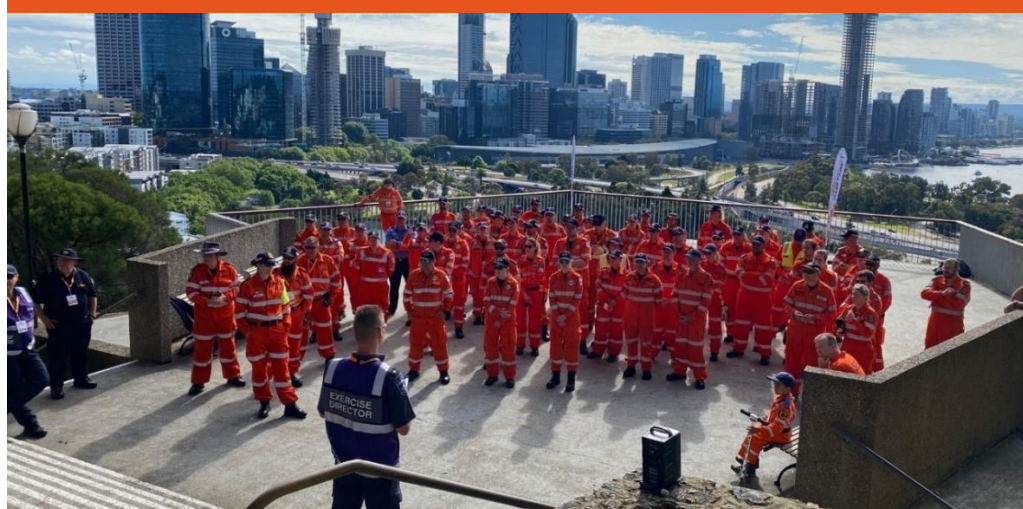
Methodology

The SESVA-WA conducted a workshop in July 2022 and a roadshow in April and May 2023 to consult and capture the views of member SES units and their continuing volunteer contribution. Those views have been collated and expressed in the [SESVA Position Paper published in May 2024](#)¹. This supporting paper provides further explanation of the recommendations in that Position Paper and proposes a separate command structure that was developed in consultation with and discussion with WA SES units.

Approval

The SESVA Executive and Management Committees have approved this position.

Photo 1. SES volunteers receive a briefing at Kings Park with the Perth City skyline in the background.



¹ <https://ses-wa.asn.au/document/proposed-emergency-services-act-position-paper/>

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President's Foreword

In an era increasingly defined by natural disasters and complex emergencies, the role of emergency services volunteers stands as one of the true pillars of strength within our communities. These dedicated individuals are the backbone of community resilience, often putting their own safety at risk to protect lives, property, and the environment. Their unwavering commitment not only exemplifies courage but also highlights the essential role volunteerism plays in safeguarding Western Australia.

Despite their invaluable contributions, the legislative framework governing emergency management frequently falls short of addressing the unique challenges these volunteers face. There remains a critical gap in recognising the evolving demands placed upon them and in providing the support necessary to sustain their vital work.

This paper builds upon the Position Paper released by SESVA in May 2024, illuminating the urgent need for comprehensive, forward-thinking emergency management legislation. It calls for a legal framework that not only acknowledges the sacrifices of our volunteers but actively empowers them with the resources, training, and protections required to meet the escalating demands of modern crises.

Western Australia's emergency response capabilities rely on a model where the distinct entities of the SES, Local Government Bush Fire Brigades, DFES, and Marine Rescue bring their unique expertise and strengths together. Each organisation plays a vital role, but it is through collaboration that we form a united front, ready to protect our communities. Together, we are the pillars of strength that uphold the safety and resilience of Western Australians, demonstrating that our combined efforts are greater than the sum of our parts.

DFES is uniquely positioned to collaborate with SES volunteers in the drafting of legislation that reflects the diverse needs of the Western Australian community. This collaboration should address the eight State hazard plans for which the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner serves as the hazard management agency while also considering the socio-economic realities of 21st-century volunteerism.

We must also contribute to the [Climate Adaptation Strategy](#)² as a willing volunteer workforce.

By working together, we can strengthen the foundations of our emergency management systems and ensure that our volunteers remain at the forefront of community protection, ready to face the challenges ahead.



Greg Cook
President, SES Volunteer's Association of WA (Inc.)

² <https://www.wa.gov.au/service/environment/environment-information-services/climate-adaptation-strategy>

Introduction

This paper supports the SES Volunteers Association of WA Position Paper released in May 2024 and provides further explanation of the recommendations in that paper. There is a focus on community empowerment and building pillars of strength through discrete structures. The future SES structure presented is based on a separate SES command structure within DFES that will provide a golden opportunity for improving service delivery and excellence in managing climate change adaption.

Empowering communities for disaster resilience³

Large-scale and devastating natural hazards are becoming more frequent as Australia experiences climate change. Such events impact personal lives, as well as social, economic, and the natural environment in which we live.

The ability to respond to and recover from these events is a collective responsibility. In partnership with the Government of Western Australia and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES)⁴, the State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers who come from all walks of life and communities across Western Australia, are the champions who play a critical role in responding to and recovering from natural hazard impacts.

Since 1999, SES volunteers have been the general responsibility of FESA / DFES. However, with the changing demographic of Australian society, the increased prevalence of disasters, and the tyranny of distance, the existing fostering model is aged.

To support the volunteers who support their communities, it is necessary for a reinvigorated framework that meets the challenges of a changed environment. Refer to Appendix 1 – Conceptual Framework for Empowering Communities.

Photo 2. Empowered SES volunteers undertaking various roles in their local community every hour of the day all year long.



³ National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, Council of Australian Governments, February 2011.

⁴ Proposed Emergency Services Act 2024, Position Paper on behalf of the SES Volunteers Association of WA, SES Volunteers Association of WA, 2024, Recommendation 1.

SESVA Recommendations⁵

The SESVA made seven recommendations in its Position Paper published in May 2024. Further explanation of each recommendation is provided here for consideration when drafting the proposed Emergency Services Act and when developing policies and structures for service delivery to achieve excellence in managing climate change adaption.

Recommendation 1 – Working Together

The challenge

« Working Together - *Together we can; Together we will* »

Recommendation

The 64 SES Units and SESVA work in collaboration with DFES and the WA Government.

Opportunity

This recommendation strengthens the four themes from the WA Government 2023 Emergency Preparedness Report.

Rationale

This recommendation will assist with the development of a Governance Framework (Recommendation 2 below) defining the rules, relationships, systems and processes by which DFES, the SES Units and SESVA carry on their business for the benefit of the WA community.

Recommendation 2 – Governance Model

The challenge

« Create a governance model or framework that defines the rules, relationships, systems, and processes by which SESVA Units and volunteers, SESVA and DFES operate their organisations »

Recommendation

The SESVA recommends that a charter be enshrined in the legislation between the WA Government, DFES and SESVA for and on behalf of SES units and volunteers.

⁵ Proposed Emergency Services Act 2024, Position Paper on behalf of the SES Volunteers Association of WA, SES Volunteers Association of WA, 2024, 27-28.



Opportunity

Good governance improves the performance of the organisation, helps it become more stable and productive, and unlocks new opportunities. It can reduce risks and enable faster and safer growth. It can also improve reputation and cultivate trust. This in turn will empower communities to continue to volunteer, support each other, and build resilience.

Rationale

A charter, enshrined in the legislation, between the WA Government, DFES, and SESVA for and on behalf of SES units and volunteers would:

- Establish a partnership/alliance with clear governance arrangements.
- Define the accountabilities and responsibilities of the parties to the Charter, including their functions, objectives and powers.
- Recognise the independent management autonomy and authority of the parties to the Charter.
- The WA Government and DFES to recognise, value, respect and promote the contribution of SES volunteers, SES units and SESVA.
- The WA Government and DFES to commit to consulting with SESVA on behalf of SES units on any matter that might reasonably affect them.
- Establish a dispute resolution mechanism.

Photo 3. SES volunteers with other 2025 WAFES award winners joined by the Minister, the FES Commissioner & DFES staff.



Recommendation 3 – Legal Protection for Volunteers

The challenge
« Legal protection for SES volunteers »

Recommendation

The SESVA recommends that legal protection for SES volunteers, units, and SESVA be preserved and clarified in the new legislation.

Opportunity

Clarify the extent of protections of volunteers under law.

Rationale

SES volunteers need to be confident that they are fully protected in the performance of their duties and when assisting the community.

Legal services also need to be provided for SES Volunteers and SESVA management and volunteers the same as it is for the employees and officers of DFES.

Recommendation 4 – Establishment of a senior executive officer

The challenge
« Provide an organisational structure that is responsive to the community, climate adaption and volunteer expectations and DFES service delivery »

Recommendation

The SES should be under the command and control of a senior executive officer.
(Note: this is a minor change from the position paper released in May 2024 that now refers more to the function rather than the position title.)

Opportunity

DFES can then build and maintain a dedicated capability that will deal with natural hazards and the impacts of climate change.

Rationale

An experienced leader and manager with an emergency service or civil defence environment background as a senior executive for SES:

- Implement more effective strategies to better prepare frontline volunteers and the WA community for the increasing impacts of natural hazards and to provide a dedicated leadership of the SES volunteer natural hazards response service on behalf of the FES Commissioner and the WA Government.
- Be a key member of the command leadership team with a direct influence on high-level strategy and effective decision-making processes, including consultation as required with the SESVA on behalf of SES units.
- Provide advocacy for resources and for funding of training and administration that supports the reinvigorated volunteer strategies of DFES and the needs of the community.

Recommendation 5 – Ongoing induction, training and professional development of volunteers

The challenge

« SES volunteer training, competency maintenance and professional development that are reflective of volunteer and community expectations »

Recommendation

The SESVA recommends that DFES management commit to establishing a more efficient, focused, and strategic approach to natural hazards training and development of SES volunteers including:

- A professional training culture for SES volunteers.
- Provision of nationally recognised training for SES volunteers.
- Professional development for volunteer SES leaders and training managers.
- Development of training products, continuation training, large practical exercises, skills maintenance, and the provision of fit-for-purpose resources.
- Provision of dedicated SES operational training officers at the regional level.

Opportunity

A senior executive officer with oversight of compliance obligations of SES training and providing advocacy for resources and training that support volunteer strategies and the needs of the community therefore must be done effectively and efficiently.

Rationale

The community expects that the SES will respond in a competent and disciplined manner, and this starts with trained volunteer leaders and managers. The development of volunteer SES leaders and training managers has a direct influence on volunteer satisfaction. Training that is engaging, interesting, challenging and relevant to the roles of SES volunteers contributes to personal well-being and resilience.

The development of training products, continuation training, large practical exercises, competency maintenance and the provision of the requisite physical resources instils confidence that DFES is committed to the volunteer effort of the SES units in WA, and the wellbeing of individual volunteers.

The provision of nationally recognised training under the Australian Quality Training Framework for SES volunteers will provide a benchmark for the standard of volunteer training and incentivise recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Photo 4. A highly skilled team of SES volunteers practice rescue techniques under realistic



Recommendation 6 – Ongoing funding for operational and capital expenditure, including vehicles and facilities

The challenge

« Consistency in funding, processes and communication of decisions and information about SES operating and capital expenditure »

Recommendation

The SESVA recommends that funding for SES units and the SESVA matches the requirement of preparing for and responding to climate adaption.

Funding processes be streamlined, and funding allocated to the SES to be managed by a dedicated SES staff led by a senior executive officer and frontline volunteers under a single natural hazards management structure.

Major expenditures, such as buildings and vehicles, are planned and budgeted to meet essential criteria such as:

- State hazard plans and DFES strategic plan.
- Work health and safety.
- Current and future frequency and intensity of operational requirements.
- Future needs of frontline volunteers for training and other non-operational requirements.

Opportunity

Consolidate, streamline and centralise processes that minimise financial management risk and provide transparency and accountability.

Rationale

Good processes improve the ability of DFES to identify, plan, fund and resolve issues around buildings, vehicles, equipment and training.

This would reduce risk and enable faster and safer growth to meet operational requirements related to natural hazards and the impacts of climate change by:

- Consistency in the interpretation of procedures.
- Key stakeholder ownership and feedback loop.
- Planning and future profiling of the community's ability to respond to natural and man-made disasters.
- Allowing DFES time to budget and advocate for major capital expenditure to stakeholders.
- Ensuring that SES Units have consistent and known operational capabilities that meet the needs of both their local and neighbouring community.

Adequate funding of the SES Volunteers Association of WA (Inc) can ensure a dedicated independent body is sustained to represent the volunteers of the SES in WA to aid consultation by DFES and government, to communicate SES-related information and provide effective advocacy for SES volunteers in WA.

Photo 5. SES volunteers training with specialist equipment on a remote WA coastal cliff.



Recommendation 7 – Information technology, accounting, safety, and centralised management systems

The challenge

« Support arrangements for SES units that are consistent with modern Government expectations »

« Administrative practices for volunteer units that are consistent »

Recommendation

The SESVA recommends that DFES simplify and standardise its administrative practices for volunteer units for DFES to operate more effectively and efficiently.

The SESVA recommends that SES administrative and other support systems be managed by dedicated SES staff led by a senior executive officer and frontline volunteers under their own management structure along with appropriate levels of security support.

Opportunity

Improved collaboration and direct reporting to DFES will reduce the risk created by inconsistent operation of various systems and processes.

Rationale

The community is the winner with competent, capable, and resourced SES units where the risks are reduced, and the reputation is one of trust. This in turn can empower communities to continue to volunteer, help and support each other.

- Simplified and standardised administrative practices for the 64 volunteer SES units will serve to eliminate inconsistencies in application and understanding.
- Improved administrative practices and initiatives facilitated by a senior executive officer and their staff would ensure adequate resourcing and alignment with accepted business solutions and standards that serve both the volunteer and career staff strategies of DFES and the needs of communities.
- The coordinated support and improved systems will enable SES volunteers to concentrate on the core skills and knowledge requirements to meet community expectations and contribute considerably to the retention of volunteers.
- Systems that are operated by DFES staff can also be operated by volunteers.
- Systems and processes that are shared, understood and operated with consistency by SES volunteers and career staff contribute to community resilience.

Preferred command structure

After consultations with SES units, SES volunteer leaders prefer their own command structure, albeit within the Department of Fire and Emergency Services as one of the key pillars of strength.

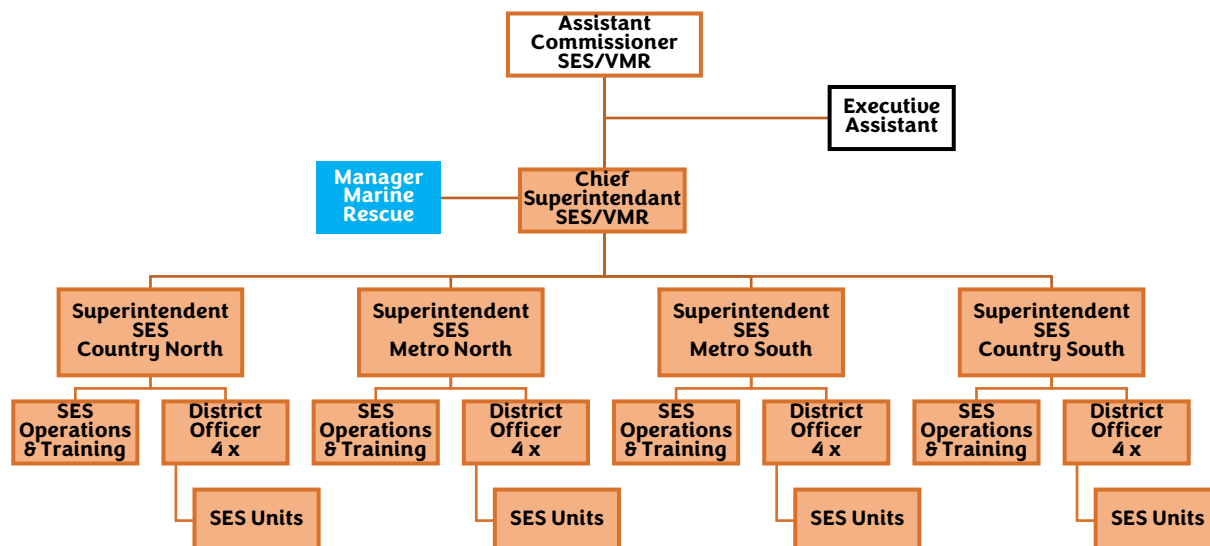


Figure 1. Preferred command structure

Cost analysis indicates that the above-proposed structure provides high rewards for DFES for a low additional investment because SES only requires a redistribution of existing staff positions within DFES and a small number of new positions.

Conclusion

This paper supports the SES Volunteers Association of WA Position Paper released in May 2024 and provides further explanation of the recommendations in that paper.

There is a focus on community empowerment and the building of pillars of strength through discrete structures.

The future SES structure presented is based on a separate SES command structure derived through consultations with SES leaders in 2022, 2023, and 2024.

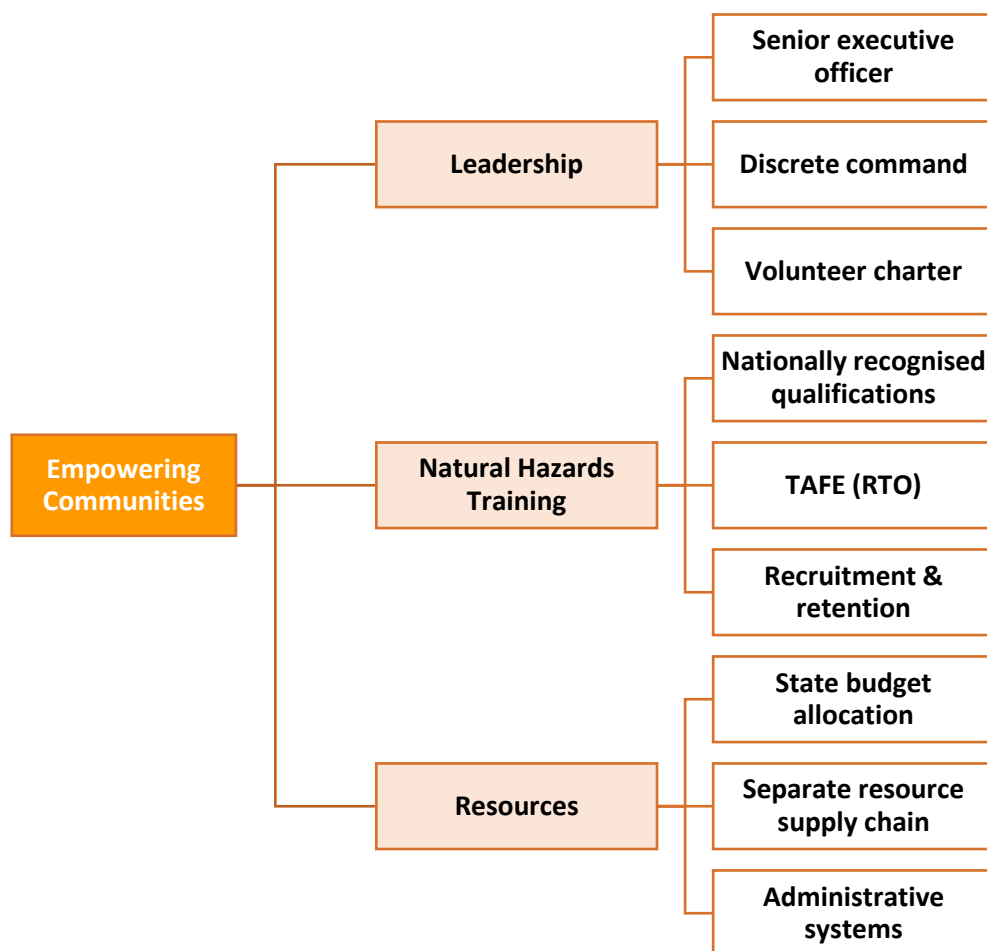
We must look over the horizon.

Appendix:

1. Conceptual Framework for Empowering Communities

Appendix 1:

Conceptual Framework for Empowering Communities



Leadership

Senior executive officer

An appropriate community and volunteer-centred culture requires volunteer focused leadership.⁶

Discrete Command⁷

Equally, leadership and management at all levels of command needs to be volunteer-focused, whether career staff or volunteers, and fostering a collaborative and shared vision. A command structure works best when it is hazard specific. Thus, natural hazards sit with SES.

⁶ Ibid, Recommendation 4.

⁷ Ibid, Recommendation 2.

Volunteer Charter

Governance of SES units would be served through a Volunteer Charter that:

- Sets out the aspirations of the relationship between volunteers and employed staff,
- Provides for the rights and obligations of the parties and remedies,
- Harmonises the employment relationship of volunteers with the public service/contract staff, and
- Provides legal protections for SES volunteers on a similar footing with those of public service staff.⁸

Natural hazards training

Training for disaster response and recovery requires training and practice, both within the communities and the SES leadership/command/volunteers.

Nationally recognised qualifications

The provision of training pathways for SES volunteers like those in other States would provide harmonisation of interstate competency and provide for professional development for staff and volunteers.⁹

TAFE (RTO)

DFES and SES are principally preparedness and response focused. The cost of training is arguably better managed through outsourcing national qualification training to another training organisation such as TAFE. This would relieve DFES of its RTO burden and allow DFES to focus on gap training to meet its Western Australian requirements.

Recruitment and retention

Recruitment of volunteers is a widely accepted challenge across the entire volunteering spectrum. Emergency service volunteering is not for everyone. The turnover rate of DFES volunteers is approximately 23% and the cost of losing each volunteer is estimated as \$710. Volunteers who are motivated participate in more activities and have a higher retention rate.¹⁰

Providing volunteers with a nationally recognised qualification and means to a career path in emergency services is a big incentive for volunteers to remain.

Resources

State budget allocation

Each year, Government departments 'bid' for a share of the expenditure budget. Funding for a reinvigorated framework is required to enable challenges for empowering communities to meet climate adaptation needs. The proper provision of budget allocation to SES would provide certainty within DFES for adequate funding of SES over and above the Local Government collected Emergency Services Levy.

⁸ *Ibid*, Recommendation 2 & 3.

⁹ *Ibid*, Recommendation 5.

¹⁰ Darja Kragt, Patrick Dunlop, Marylène Gagné, Djurre Holtrop and Aleksandra Luksyte, *When joining is not enough: emergency services volunteers and the intention to remain*, Australian Journal of Emergency Management, October 2018, page 35.



Separate resource supply chain

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The provision of resources for SES is mixed with the wider fire resources requirements. The bidding war for resources within DFES would be largely avoided by allowing SES to identify and manage its resource requirements.¹¹ An all-hazards resource-to-risk (R2R) assessment is essential.¹²

Administrative systems

There are 64 SES units spread across WA, each with its own incorporated structure and management arrangements. The provision of a dedicated leadership structure that is SES-focused would foster better uniformity and efficiency.¹³

Position Statements

In May 2024, the SES Volunteers Association of WA released its Position Paper on behalf of SES units.

That Position Paper provided recommendations for a pathway towards a collaborative approach to enhance the capabilities of State Emergency Service management and build stronger more resilient communities.

Photo 6. SES Search team handing over a casualty in a stretcher to a Flood Rescue Boat team to cross the Murchison River.



¹¹ Proposed Emergency Services Act 2024, Position Paper on behalf of the SES Volunteers Association of WA, 2024, SES Volunteers Association of WA, Recommendation 6.

¹² The last R2R assessment is thought to have been produced in 2011.

¹³ Proposed Emergency Services Act 2024, Position Paper on behalf of the SES Volunteers Association of WA, 2024, SES Volunteers Association of WA, Recommendation 7.



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