

# Identifying key issues affecting the retention of emergency service volunteers

## Identifying and analysing the factors influencing volunteer participation & retention

The major purpose of this paper is to look at those factors which appear to influence Western Australian volunteer participation and retention and to focus on possible options open to Emergency Service Organizations to ensure that they utilize their volunteers effectively and maintain their interest and involvement.

Initially I believe that we have to ask ourselves two questions:

1. Why do people become volunteers?
2. Why do they remain as volunteers?

In late 1998, and early 1999, the WA Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA), in conjunction with Edith Cowan University, conducted a survey of its volunteers in an attempt to explore both these issues. This survey was based on a similar format used with the New Zealand Fire Service in the mid 1990's. Approximately 1400 survey forms were distributed to volunteers in the three Emergency Services coming under the FESA umbrella:

- the Fire & Rescue Service (FRS)
- the Bush Fire Service (BFS)
- the State Emergency Service (SES)

542 completed forms were received. The returned sample comprised 40% FRS volunteers, 30.5% BFS and 15% SES.

## Major outcomes of the survey

The survey asked for responses in the following areas:

- general levels of satisfaction with the role as a volunteer
- how many hours per week (on average) did the person spend on volunteer activities
- why did the person become a volunteer
- why did they remain a volunteer
- the effects of their employment on availability as a volunteer
- satisfaction levels with the various kinds of activities undertaken as a volunteer

Firstly and most importantly, the survey found high levels of satisfaction amongst the sample with their volunteer role:

- 55% 'Agreed' they were satisfied
- 31.4% 'Strongly agreed'
- 4% were 'Unsure'
- 2.5% 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed' that they were satisfied with their roles

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as volunteers. This relationship of strong 'agreement' held across male/female responses, across respondents from the three Services and irrespective of whether the respondents were officers or not.

Also of interest were the responses to the question of why did people become volunteers. This was an open-ended question and the results were tallied according to the types of responses received. Over 25 categories of responses were recorded, many of which only had one or two entries and were therefore of no real significance. The major categories of responses to the question and the proportions for each were:

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| • sense of community                                | 50.2% |
| • social and mateship reasons                       | 13%   |
| • to try something different or learn new skills    | 8.5%  |
| • to be involved in competitions, training or games | 6.3%  |
| • a sense of duty—somebody has to                   | 6.1%  |
| • interest  | 6.1%  |
| • to help others or protect lives and property      | 6.0%  |

Hence, it appears that the two major reasons for people becoming volunteers lie in:

- the social benefits associated with being a volunteer
- being in a position to help others and the community

On the issue of why do people remain volunteers, the majority of respondents indicated that they remained as volunteers for 'enjoyment' reasons. Respondents gave other reasons, but none assumed the same significance in terms of response rates as the 'enjoyment' category.

The results of the survey tend to indicate that in looking at the issues of attracting and retaining volunteers,

agencies need to focus their recruitment and retention strategies around the issues of making volunteerism interesting and enjoyable. At the same time, agencies must also ensure that community service and the social benefits of participating in volunteer brigades and units are suitably highlighted when seeking new volunteers and when constructing policies and procedures related to the running of brigades and units.

Before examining other issues in relation to volunteer retention, it is also interesting to examine the responses to the questions in the survey on the activities that volunteers enjoyed, since this also provides important clues to strategies for future retention.

Amongst FRS and BFS volunteers, the four most favoured activities were:

- firefighting
- assisting and aiding the community
- social activities
- physical training (ie training of a practical bent)

Those least favoured were:

- administration
- competitions
- educating the public on issues
- theory training

Although in each of those latter cases, a majority of respondents still reported these activities as 'OK' or 'Satisfying'.

In dealing with volunteers, members of FESA staff spend many hours talking to volunteers in the course of their duties. As a consequence the views and opinions of volunteers filter back to policy makers and planners from a diversity of sources. This 'colloquial' evidence should also be collected systematically by agencies and due recognition given to it as a source of valuable data when developing policies on volunteer issues. In many instances this colloquial evidence is also linked to common sense and administrators should continually project themselves into the situation of a volunteer and ask themselves 'How would I feel if asked to do this?'

## 'Colloquial' evidence

What are some of these examples of 'colloquial' evidence about volunteers collected in FESA and possibly relevant to other Agencies?

- *Don't waste volunteer time:* volunteers object to activities that they see as 'padding' or doing something simply for the sake of doing it. Don't run extended training programs, about half a day is ideal to encourage maximum attendance.
- *If long training courses have to be used* (ie in terms of time), try and break them up so that they can be taken in small chunks at the convenience of the volunteer.
- *Training must be 'relevant':* any training undertaken has to be seen to be related to the jobs volunteers are called on to do.
- *Don't ask volunteers to read too much material,* either in training or administration. If the Agency has a message to get out, then it should either be delivered verbally on a personal basis or put into video form. Lengthy written material will often be 'binned' or put on a notice board and not read. As much as possible, the Agency's communications strategy with volunteers should be based on verbal 'face to face' communications, or a video approach, rather than written communiques.
- *Realize that amongst any Emergency Services volunteer population there is usually a significant literacy problem:* in WA it was estimated in research done some 5 years ago, that anywhere up to 20% of volunteers may have some form of literacy problems, with 5–7% having severe problems. This has implications for :
  - the delivery of training
  - training assessments
  - volunteer communications
  - volunteer administration
- *Keep it 'simple':* complex instructions won't be read.
- *'Remember were only volunteers':* an often repeated statement that seems to carry with it a number of unspoken implications:
  - if we don't like what you do we'll stop being involved
  - you're not my 'boss' and I therefore have the right to question you if I don't like what you say or do
  - I don't have to do anything I don't want to
  - keep us happy or you will lose us, etc.
- *Remember that their main motivation is the needs of their local communities,* not the Emergency Services Agency. Therefore don't just assume they are 'employees' in a different guise and treat them accordingly.
- *Volunteers give their time and effort*

*without direct monetary reward:* hence amongst a significant proportion of them runs the feeling that the Government 'owes us'. Many volunteers therefore expected that the Agency should meet all reasonable volunteer wishes and demands.

- *Rural volunteers in particular seem to have significant anti-government, anti-bureaucracy feelings:* this emerged strongly in a survey of BFS volunteers that FESA undertook in the latter part of 1997 and early 1998. Many volunteers are quite happy to deal with local government agencies, but are immediately suspicious of officials from centrally based organisations. This suspicion can sometimes extend to the point where they refuse to supply data or information to central sources and ignore requests for information, particularly information that has a personal bias.
  - *This natural suspicion often means that new Agency staff appointed to a rural area can be treated warily until local volunteers get to know them:* once known and accepted they will usually have greater local standing amongst volunteers than headquarters staff of similar or higher status and often will be believed more than senior officers who only appear occasionally on the local scene. Stability and careful selection of field staff is therefore a critical factor in the success of an Agency's dealings with its volunteers.
  - *There appears to be a strong strain of 'egalitarianism' running through Emergency Service volunteers:* this appears to come out of such things as:
    - Australia's rural cultural makeup and long standing traditions that 'Jack is as good as his master'
    - the fact that volunteers give their services for free
    - the strong interpersonal and local ties that characterize Emergency Service units
    - the need to depend on others in the Unit in emergency situations
- The upshot of this is that Agencies utilizing volunteers must be prepared to adopt a number of different approaches in their dealings with volunteers, eg:
- Senior staff of the Agency must be prepared to accept strong vocal criticism on issues that impact on volunteers at local levels.
  - The Agency must be prepared to consult widely with volunteers on all matters that are seen to impact on them.
  - The Agency must ensure that they

have a visible and local presence with all volunteers.

- The Agency must strive to keep volunteers informed on what is happening in a wider context within the organization.
- *Volunteers only want to get on the 'red' trucks and go to fires with sirens on and lights flashing!:* they are not really interested in other activities (e.g. fire prevention, community education, etc).
- *Emergency Service volunteers tend to see themselves as unpaid 'professionals':* the only difference, in their eyes, between themselves and the Agency staff is that those staff are paid. Hence, the Agency staff must demonstrate that they are much better than the volunteers in all aspects of their work are if they wish to earn their trust and respect.

These comments are based largely on local Western Australian experience. However, I believe that any Agency working with volunteers should make an effort to collect not only formal research evidence on what volunteers think and feel, they should also try and regularly collect colloquial evidence from field staff who deal with volunteers on a regular basis.

Historically Emergency Service Agencies have, I believe, tended to take their volunteers somewhat for granted. They have simply transferred established employment practices from permanent staff into the volunteer area. In the past this has been possible, but I believe that the current climate of change, particularly in rural areas, means that Agencies must now begin to undertake more formal research into volunteer needs and desires, in order to obtain a greater understanding of their volunteer populations. The findings of this research can then be applied to their policies, procedures and practices in order to ensure that they can recruit and retain sufficient numbers of suitable volunteers to maintain current levels of services to the community.

### What are the differences between metropolitan and country volunteers?

Is it possible to identify any major differences between metropolitan and country volunteers? Unfortunately, very little directed research appears to exist on this particular issue, but in late 1997 and early 1998 a survey was conducted of Bush Fire Service (BFS) rural/farming and metropolitan brigades on proposed entry standards for volunteers. The results of this survey were mainly directed towards entry standards for new recruits, but some

interesting ancillary facts emerged re the differences between rural and metropolitan brigades:

- rural/farming brigades claimed they generally knew all of their new recruits, the point being made was that as a result they did not need to run formal selection procedures for these new recruits
- on the other hand, metropolitan brigades felt that the proposed procedures were a good way to get to know new recruits; they indicated that often they had not seen new recruits before and needed to have screening procedures in place, that would give them time to get to know them
- a number of rural/farming brigades complained about a complete absence of potential new members in their areas; many stated that they would be happy to take anyone they could get, but that there was no one available in their local catchment areas. No such comments were received from brigades in or near metropolitan areas
- rural/farming brigades were obviously more comfortable with more informal and less structured approaches to recruitment issues, whilst metropolitan brigades seemed happier to accept more formal checks and procedures
- there were unsolicited comments in a lot of the rural/farming returns about these proposed procedures being 'red tape' and 'bureaucratic nonsense'. No such comments were received from metropolitan returns

What became evident after analysing the survey was that there appeared to be real differences between the returns received from rural/farming and metro brigades. Unfortunately, as the original survey did not set out to deal with the issue of differences between metropolitan and rural brigades and the size of the total sample was small (100), it was not possible to place too much faith in the results that emerged. Despite this the outcomes were interesting enough to lead us to believe that there could be real value in more formal research in this area at a later date. Differences detected were significant enough to possibly indicate that we should be dealing with metropolitan and rural brigades in different ways.

As a consequence we also began to question field staff about potential differences between the two groups. The issues we were interested in were: why we would have received such comments from rural brigades; and what field staff saw as the major differences between metropolitan and rural brigades. Fol-

lowing is a summary of the major points that emerged from these discussions.

### Rural/farming brigades

- are usually much smaller in terms of numbers of volunteers; they are normally comprised of people who know one another socially and have similar interests and occupations (ie. farming)
- seem to be suffering recruitment problems in marginal farming areas; the average age of their members appears to be getting older and many of them are complaining about the difficulties of getting any members
- usually supply their own equipment and appliances
- are often just small groups of farmers who band together out of self-interest to protect their crops and farms, hence the groups usually have a clear objective and common purpose (ie no motivation problems and little internal bickering or strife with respect to 'brigade' issues)
- their training is normally only at a basic level and directed towards wildfire fighting
- most of their incidents are related to roadside, scrub and crop fires (for many of these brigades there are usually only 1 or 2 a season)
- everyone knows everyone else, potential new recruits are usually known from a young age and if deemed suitable are encouraged to join
- there seems to be a strong aversion amongst the members of such brigades to what they see as central government 'bureaucracy' and at times a strong unwillingness to co-operate with people in 'head office'
- seem to like to work without formal rules or procedures: this may be due to their smaller size and the fact that they are usually more cohesive social groups.
- amongst these brigades there is usually very little interest in what is happening elsewhere within the Agency
- local persons seen as unsuitable are informally discouraged from joining, new members who are initially unknown to brigade members, but who do not work out as being suitable, are often 'encouraged' to leave through informal (but usually very effective) social pressures within the group
- their different social structure (much more informal), their small size, lesser training requirements and the infrequent occurrence of incidents leads, I believe, to a situation which merits different management approaches

from Emergency Service Agencies. Once the Agency is satisfied that the brigade has the appropriate skills to work safely and efficiently, then they should, if possible, leave these brigades alone (unless they seek advice or assistance). Agencies should avoid prescribing rules for rural brigades. They should be treated much more informally and administrative demands on them kept to a minimum.

### Metropolitan and outer metro brigades

- usually much larger in size
- usually include persons from different backgrounds and with different interests; outside the brigades, the people involved do not usually know one another socially before they join, therefore I believe that as a result metropolitan and large town brigades can often be more fragmented and internally less cohesive than rural/farming brigades
- the motivation for joining a metropolitan brigade is often a generalized feeling of being involved in a community service activity or doing something, which is inherently interesting; as a result, cohesion and common purpose often have to be built into the group's thinking since these brigades are not primarily focused on localized and clear cut self protection (compared with rural/farming brigades)
- new recruits are often not known at all to existing members of brigades, hence there are often no built in social 'screening' processes such as those that appear to exist in rural/farming brigades. It is interesting in this regard, that all of the cases of arson amongst volunteer firefighters in WA have been connected with volunteers on the fringes of metropolitan areas where these informal social screening processes are unable to operate to the same degree
- because of their larger size and more fragmented nature, metropolitan brigades usually require more formal procedures to operate effectively, eg, such brigades seem to prefer to have formal written disciplinary procedures to deal with difficult cases (compared to rural brigades); while they normally don't like to be told what to do, they do seem to prefer the security of a set of defined rules and procedures within which to operate
- Metro brigades usually handle more incidents per year of a greater diversity (eg. HAZMAT, vehicle rescue, as well as



bush scrub and grass fires, etc). This usually requires them to train in a wider range of skills and the higher number of incidents can often mean that they have to formalise their crew rostering and availability schedules, etc. This in turn places more pressure on the members and usually requires them to be in attendance more often for training, incidents and meetings.

- their bigger size and higher member numbers makes them more dependent on formal administrative systems to allow them to operate effectively; many members work for large firms, companies and the government, hence they are more used to formal administration and feel more comfortable in such a framework
- because of the training requirements and higher incident levels there are many more pressures placed on brigade members with respect to time away from families; many of the volunteers in these brigades almost regard their volunteer work as a part time vocation, hence, there is usually more interest and feeling generated in these brigades on what is happening generally within the Agency
- the larger of these brigades often require heavy involvement from their senior members with respect to management and administration, some of the bigger brigades have now hired part-time clerical workers to carry out their administrative work.

It is not possible to draw a line in the sand and place all FESA brigades into one of these two categories. The above comments have been put together more by looking at the extreme ends of the spectrum. Many brigades fall in between the above descriptions and obviously exhibit qualities of both types of brigades. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that all FESA brigades will fall into one of these two categories, or exhibit the majority of characteristics of one or the other.

### Implications of these differences

What are the implications of these differences for Emergency Service Agencies and in particular the retention of members? The major implications seem to be that Agencies need to approach small rural brigades much more informally and leave them to their own devices to a much greater degree. They should normally wait until the brigades approach them with a problem (eg recruitment of members), provide assistance and then move back to await further developments. Monitoring brigade activities should be

more informal. Apart from establishing that these brigades can function safely the Agency should in general endeavour to leave rural brigades alone to a much greater degree.

The emerging dilemma for Emergency Service Agencies appears to be that while the style of operation of rural/farming brigades suits a non-interventionist, non-regulatory approach, it is in precisely these types of brigades (and those in small country towns) that our 'aging' and retention problems appear to be occurring to the greatest degree. Hence, Agencies will need to develop support mechanisms to overcome local recruitment and retention problems, whilst at the same time taking account of the informal and relatively unstructured nature of rural brigades.

On the other hand, metropolitan/outer metropolitan brigades seem to tolerate much more direct intervention by the Agency. They appear to be prepared to accept more formal guidelines, rules and procedures, but do not (at this stage) appear to have quite the same recruitment and retention problems as rural/farming brigades.

### Determining the effects of change on a volunteer population

Within Western Australia, there is mounting evidence that our volunteer populations in country areas are being subjected to social and economic change which will, I believe, shortly begin to impact on our ability to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of trained volunteers. In broad terms, this process of change now appears to be well under way and is likely to increase in intensity and scope over the coming decade.

What are some of these changes? I believe that two of the biggest have their source in two major economic shifts that are currently taking place:

- falling gold and other metal prices that are impacting on mining towns in the north and east of the state
- falling rural incomes (e.g. from grain and wool) that are effecting farming areas and the towns that are dependent on them—this is already evident in changes that are taking place in towns and areas in the more 'marginal' farming areas of the state.

What are the general effects of these two broad trends?

#### In mining areas:

- mine closures and direct loss of populations (e.g. Kambalda & Norseman)
- changing shift patterns in the mines

(eg. a move to 12-hour shifts) which reduce volunteer availability

- a tendency to work 2-3 days of concentrated shifts followed by 2-3 days off – workers then may move out of the town during their time off periods, which means they are usually not available either during their shifts or in their time off
- loss of income in the local towns and hence reductions in employment opportunities (eg. shops & service industries) which in turn helps to reduce the number of people available to act as Emergency Service volunteers.

The general outcome is that local brigades/units in mining towns are now finding it more difficult to attract volunteers.

#### In rural/agricultural areas:

- falling rural incomes, increasing individual productivity and an aging rural population have tended to lead to the amalgamation of farms and properties, hence, fewer people are available on farms to act as volunteers
- increasing rural productivity, in particular when combined with falling rural incomes, has led to sharp reductions in the amount of employment available in rural areas, which in turn has impacted on the supply of people available to act as volunteers
- local towns have consequently suffered as their customer bases shrink and available people are spending less money, and as a result, many businesses have closed and fewer people again are available to be volunteers
- there has been an increasing move of young people to the cities in search of employment.

At a volunteer brigade/unit level these changes are now beginning to be noticeable:

- there has been significant 'aging' of FESA's volunteer population in the smaller mining and rural communities
- many rural/farming brigades are now beginning to complain that they cannot get any new recruits, stating that there are not any available in their areas
- many small country towns are no longer competing in the FRS annual competitions—it is believed that this may be because they can no longer get sufficient young people into the brigade to form a competition team
- verbal reports are now beginning to filter back to FESA that in some country towns local employers are no longer as willing to release employees for volun-

teer work, since they have had to cut back due to their falling incomes.

In addition to these changes I believe that we are also seeing cultural and social changes emerging in country areas that are beginning to impact on volunteerism. Fifteen to twenty years ago the entertainment of country people was almost totally based around group activities of various kinds, eg. football clubs, cricket clubs, tennis clubs, bowling clubs, etc. The local volunteer unit was one of these groups and as such offered entertainment and opportunities to meet and interact socially with others as well as render community service. In the last decade, we have seen a major growth in more individual forms of entertainment such as video, computer games, satellite TV and the internet. These forms of entertainment have, I believe, begun to replace many of the more traditional forms of group entertainment.

The end result has been a decreasing interest in volunteer groups and activities due to a lessening of their attractiveness as a form of 'entertainment'. One offshoot has been that volunteer Captains and leaders are now telling us that the first question many people now ask when approached to join a brigade or unit is 'What's in it for me?' As one volunteer Captain put the issue, 'before there was no real competition for their time, now if what you are offering is not more interesting than other things, they are not prepared to consider joining!'

In addition to this, there are now other challenges facing Emergency Services Organisations, which in turn are going to impact on their ability to recruit and retrain volunteers:

**Minimum safety standards:** It is becoming increasingly evident that organisations such as FESA will, as a consequence of such tragedies as the fire incident at Linton in Victoria in December 1998, be required to impose safety standards on volunteer brigades. This will ensure that any volunteer going to an incident has the necessary skills to meet the range of hazards likely to be encountered at that incident. Unlike permanent firefighting crew, organizations like FESA often have no idea which volunteers are actually going to an incident until after the incident is concluded. Even then, one would have to question the efficacy of some of the reporting data forwarded by local volunteer brigades which are notoriously casual about even reporting an incident, let alone bothering to forward accurate data on who attended. I believe that in the future, in order to meet our

'duty of care' obligations, Emergency Service Organizations will have to do such things as:

- lay down minimum numbers and skills profiles for brigades
- set minimum numbers and skills profiles for different types of incidents.

Theoretically brigades would then be directed that unless they met those minimal requirements they could not be classified as operational. Nor could they undertake 'limited' roles and functions at incidents (eg if inadequate numbers of trained crew turn up to a house fire, then they must limit their activities and immediately call out support). Obviously such approaches are going to be very difficult to adopt in isolated towns and areas where there are just no back-up brigades available. This is a difficult issue, but one which I believe agencies will have to address in the future.

At the same time Agencies may also have to look at the issue of adequate coverage by suitably trained crew. In some of our larger and busier brigades this may mean that we have to examine such things as 'rostering' of volunteers and the use of part-time paid staff in those places where sufficient number of volunteers are not available, but a service must be continued. Such requirements could have long term implications for our ability to recruit and retain volunteers unless we can clearly justify the need for such changes.

**Medical & fitness requirements:** Data collected for Australian and overseas fire services indicates that heart attacks and other fitness related matters are the greatest cause of death amongst firefighters, particularly volunteers. Over time, as part of their 'duty of care' obligations, organizations such as FESA will have to ensure that operationally active volunteers meet laid down minimum fitness and health requirements. As volunteer populations age, many of them will have difficulty in meeting such requirements. At the same time, there are many 'Norms' in our brigades/units and there is often an unwillingness, especially amongst older volunteers, to face the issues of health and fitness. In many instances the outcome of raising such issues is that older volunteers begin to complain and even attack the Agency for raising the issues and begin to talk about impositions on their time and the inability of the Agency to impose or require fitness and health standards. Unfortunately, such issues are I believe, unavoidable for all Agencies and could form a future problem, particularly when Agencies are so reliant on the skills and

knowledge of the older operational crew who are the ones usually most effected by these matters.

All of these changes are starting (or have already started) to impact on volunteer populations and our ability to retain volunteers as active members. Over the next decade I believe that we will begin to see the effects of these changes to a much greater degree. As a consequence, Emergency Service Agencies need to begin now to put in place strategies which will, at the very least, alleviate the impact of such changes and enable adequate levels of service delivery to be maintained.

### Strategic options

What strategic options are open to organisations to ensure that they utilise volunteers effectively and maintain their interest and participation?

So far I have attempted to identify changes which are impacting, or beginning to impact, on Emergency Service Agencies and their volunteers. In particular I have been focusing on FESA volunteers and the FESA situation. It now becomes necessary to look at what strategies are open to Agencies to deal with these emerging issues. Before doing so, let us recap on what these emerging issues appear to be:

- falling and aging rural populations
- declining rural and mining area incomes
- literacy problems
- changing social and cultural values, growth of the 'what's in it for me' attitude, and less willingness to work for one's local community
- changing entertainment patterns (e.g. growth of individual entertainment mediums, ie. video, TV, computer and less dependence on local groups for entertainment)
- a need for Agencies to make volunteer activities more interesting, relevant and entertaining in order to maintain volunteer interest
- increasing demands likely to be imposed on agencies and therefore placed on volunteers as a result of:
  - safety requirements resulting in more training to achieve required performance standards, hence more demands on volunteer time
  - health and fitness requirements within the context of a diminishing and aging rural population
- Increasing reluctance of employers to release volunteers for duty.

These changes will require Agencies to think carefully about their procedures and practices in a number of key areas.

The ability of Agencies to retain volunteers will be determined by what actions are taken with respect to these matters. Agencies need to develop an awareness that volunteer retention is the consequence of well thought out actions taken on a number of broad fronts over an extended period of time. I believe that lack of a planned and coordinated approach could inevitably allow crisis situations to develop. This in turn may inevitably lead to the adoption of 'band aid' approaches, that will never be as effective in volunteer management and retention.

### Volunteer retention

What then are these key areas and the strategies that Agencies should consider to improve long term volunteer retention?

### Recruitment

Recruitment campaigns will be required for all Emergency Service Agencies if the current trends of falling and aging rural populations continue, but recruitment campaigns are also opportunities to build the image and self-esteem of existing volunteers. Agencies should see such campaigns as an opportunity to not only attract new people, but also as a vehicle for building the self-esteem and feelings of worth of existing volunteers. They are therefore, a vital tool in volunteer retention strategies. What kinds of messages should be considered in such campaigns?

- focus on the local community, its needs and the opportunity to **serve** the local community (as per the research findings mentioned earlier)
- use local recruitment to praise the contributions of local key figures in the volunteer environment—indirectly, this also sends messages re the value and worth of those key figures and helps to enhance the self-image of all local volunteers
- stress the satisfaction/rewards that come from being a volunteer, eg, the respect of others, the rewards that come from knowing you are helping others, the satisfaction that comes from a 'job well done', the mateship and friendships that will result
- focus on learning new skills; praise the technical competence of existing volunteers and how new recruits can become a member of these select bands of people
- stress the interesting and challenging work that volunteers do. Indirectly this again reminds existing volunteers of the satisfactions to be obtained from their work
- begin to build a feeling that not just

anyone can get in to a volunteer brigade or unit—remember that fostering exclusivity also impacts on existing volunteers and promotes their feelings of self worth and value.

### Training

Volunteers will spend a major amount of their time in training activities (e.g. a 1997/8 FESA volunteer workload study found that approximately 30% of FRS volunteer activities were related to training in some form or other). How Agencies handle their volunteer training will inevitably become a key factor in the overall retention of volunteers. If we can make training interesting and enjoyable and pitched at the appropriate level for volunteers, then this will form a key plank in a successful retention strategy. What are some of the key elements that we must build into such a training strategy?

- *Training must be inherently interesting.* The traditional repetitive approach to drills training, which many Agencies adopted, is essentially off-putting and should be very carefully handled. This is not to say that essential skills should not be drilled until known, but vary the drills, make them different and try and place them in a relevant practical context wherever possible.
- *Volunteer training should be practically oriented and enjoyable.* Experience tends to show that volunteers will turn up for practically oriented training which involves putting out fires. They don't like theory training. Trainers must develop exercises both at basic levels and for incident command, which have a large element of realism and involve individual and group activities.
- *Focus on the 'must knows' for safety purposes.* Don't just take the training available for permanent firefighters and translate it across to volunteers. This type of training usually contains difficult concepts and lots of technical reading, much, of which volunteers don't necessarily have to know to do their jobs.
- *Remember the literacy problem.* It is too easy to slip into difficult technical language and pages of text. Substitute diagrams for text wherever possible and simple for complicated words.
- *Give rewards/recognition for completion of required skills.* Certificates and badges are two proven and tried methods of rewarding people. Remember all people of all ages like to be praised and recognized for what they do.
- *Never 'fail' people.* Develop strategies and approaches, which recognise that

people learn at different rates and some will take longer than others to learn things. Encourage volunteers to keep trying until they have learned a skill.

- *Focus on leadership training.* Identify the key skills that leaders of successful brigades have and look to develop those key skills in as many volunteer leaders as possible.
- *Focus on incident co-ordination and control skills/training.* Develop practical exercises, which will allow volunteer incident commanders to practice incident command skills in a variety of contexts.

### Internal communications

Internal agency communications is critical to the long-term retention of volunteers. A successful internal communications strategy is a key plank in ensuring retention. What are some of the important elements in such a strategy?

- the agency must ensure that volunteer concerns can be heard and that problems are dealt with quickly and properly
- there must be mechanisms in place for obtaining feedback from volunteers on all issues that concern them, seek their views on key issues and make sure that when something requires them to do work that it is cleared with them beforehand
- make sure that volunteers are informed as to what is happening in the Agency generally
- keep communications short and simple, try and make messages entertaining. Preferably use verbal rather than written forms of communication, video is an excellent medium for communicating messages to volunteers.
- try and personalize the image of the Agency with volunteers.
- utilize regional staff to communicate as much as possible with volunteers—they can then answer questions and ensure that problems are sorted out. Try and stabilize those regional staff as much as possible.

### Adopt a local community focus

I believe that the most successful brigades and those that have fewer retention problems, are usually those that are closely linked to their local communities and have a high profile within those communities. In most instances, Emergency Services have utilized and developed such links (albeit unconsciously) although at times there has been a tendency to see the local volunteer brigade as an extension of the major permanent fire service and treat it accordingly. I believe that Agencies should deliberately and



consciously use a strategy to involve local communities in the administration and management of their local volunteer brigades. What kinds of things should be done in this regard?

- focus recruitment at a local level (see earlier comments)
- ensure that the local communities are involved when recognition and rewards are given to volunteers, eg. hold presentation ceremonies at local levels
- ensure the brigade gets publicity in local press, radio and TV
- provide uniforms that have a common theme, but which have local identification markings
- ensure that brigades are encouraged to hold local social events (eg. dinners, dances, presentation nights) at which local dignitaries are invited to attend and asked to participate with Agency staff
- ensure that workable relationships are established and maintained with local municipalities
- encourage local participation in the funding for equipment, uniforms and training
- foster local junior or cadet units attached to brigades
- hold local 'open' or 'field' days at which volunteers can demonstrate their skills to the local community.

### Resourcing, finance and administration

Volunteer brigades that are inadequately resourced, administered or financed are more likely to have problems in retaining volunteers.

This is a fairly basic point, but one which is often overlooked. If an Agency establishes a brigade and then starves it of appliances, equipment or funding it is in effect sending out messages that the brigade is not important. This will have immediate and long-term effects on volunteer retention.

In addition, if the Agency's administration systems are inadequate, slow, bureaucratic in nature or overload local volunteers with work, then this will also have effects on long term retention. The persons who normally undertake the administrative work are usually the leaders of the brigade. If they become disaffected with what is happening then this will spin off to others in the brigade and will eventually impact on retention.

What then are some of the strategies that Agencies should look at in this regard?

- keep administration simple and easy; ask for as little data or reports as possible; make forms / reports, etc. readable, short and appear easy to do

- for bigger brigades provide assistance to enable them to get part-time support (if work volumes justify)
- monitor funding on an on-going basis to ensure it is adequate
- try and devolve authority to a local level as much as possible and encourage brigades to manage themselves
- ensure that there are regional staff who can provide support and assistance to administrators and brigades.

### Rewards and recognition

The rewards and recognition systems set up by the Agency for volunteers are a critical element in volunteer retention. In this regard, the balance between too much and too little is critical. If recognition and rewards are too easy to get, then they will not be valued and hence be ineffective. If on the other hand they are too difficult to get people will not be interested since they will not see them as being attainable. This is one area where research into what volunteers would like to have, as rewards/recognition would be valuable to Agencies. There appears to be a strong view amongst many volunteers that monetary rewards are not the way to go. What other rewards/recognition strategies might be considered by Agencies?

- *Recognition of Length of Service.* Appears to be a very effective recognition system (eg. national medals, etc). Again, research into exactly what are the effective elements of this reward system and how volunteers view it would be valuable.
- *Developing local community recognition systems.* For example, recognition in local press and radio and through local shires, municipalities.
- *Internal citations or medal systems* recognizing achievements in training, leadership, etc.
- *Monetary rewards* to brigades for local achievements by either individuals or the brigade as a whole.
- *Badges and uniforms.* A very tangible reward/recognition system which appears to be very effective. Again, further research on this would be invaluable.
- *Scholarships and study awards* for volunteers to allow them to travel interstate or overseas to study volunteer Emergency Service situations in other environments.

### Training, medical and fitness requirements

I believe that as part of their 'duty of care' obligations, agencies will have to require that volunteers:

- meet minimum training/skill standards

before attending incidents and be required to maintain those skills on an on-going basis

- have regular medical checkups to ensure personal safety
- meet minimum fitness standards, again for personal safety purposes.

Such requirements are not going to be well received among volunteers and could result in significant numbers losses, particularly amongst older volunteers. To overcome this, Agencies will have to strongly market these issues with volunteers. Volunteers will have to be educated on the need for such measures before any attempt is made to impose conditions or standards.

In WA, FESA has been running an experimental program trying to educate volunteers on fitness and health issues. This program has involved the spouses of volunteers and has utilized external experts providing educational sessions on health and fitness, blood pressure and cholesterol testing, fitness test and advice on diet and life style. In those brigades where it has been trialed it has been very well received and FESA is now looking at how it might be extended. Unfortunately, it is a relatively expensive program to run and there are still concerns whether its effects will have a lasting long term impact, nevertheless, it is seen as being a possible approach which could be very effective with health & fitness issues.

### The key role of regional staff or contact staff

Most agencies will have staff allocated as the major points of contact with volunteers and volunteer brigades. These staff play a critical role in the long-term retention of volunteers. The volunteer's perception of the Agency and what it is like is largely determined by how these regional staff act and speak. Volunteers are more likely to stay with the Agency if they are treated with dignity and respect. If Regional staff are helpful and supportive, if volunteer views and opinions are sought and acted upon and if they receive training which in their eyes is relevant, interesting and practically oriented, retention will be improved. It is therefore critical that those field staff be chosen with extreme care and be properly trained to carry out the role assigned to them by the Agency.

To this end it is important that the Agency give thought to the type of role that it wants these regional or contact staff to play and then provides them with training which emphasizes the key elements in that role. It should then select

and train on that basis and during the initial period in the field, monitor performance to ensure that the staff member is carrying out that role in the desired manner. In addition, I also believe that a key element in long term volunteer retention is whether or not Agencies are prepared to set up systems to obtain feedback from volunteers on the level of services they receive both from Regional staff and the Agency as a whole and then be prepared to act on the results of that feedback.

### The quality of local volunteer leadership

This is, in my view, the most critical of all factors in promoting long term volunteer retention. The local Captain or Brigade Leader is the most frequent point of contact (ie in authority figure terms) for all volunteers. All Emergency Services have had cases where a change of leadership has taken what was a good brigade to being a broken and fragmented one, with old volunteers leaving and potential new ones either refusing to join, or joining and not remaining for any length of time. Most of our volunteer leaders receive training in the technical skills of brigade command. What Emergency Services tend not to do, or gloss over, is to focus on the 'soft' skills involved in dealing with people.

Again, there is a need for research into this area of what makes some brigades successful and able to retain members and the leader's role in this. I believe that we should be recognizing the critical role of the volunteer leader in these matters and providing training in this regard. Many people will argue that in a volunteer situation, the natural leader finds their way to this position and the skills developed in the brigade and other local clubs and organisations in the community, when combined with experiences in the local brigade, enables them to deal successfully with all the different types of problems that arise. This is probably true, but what are these critical 'soft' skills that such leaders require? Agencies need to identify what those 'soft' skills are and then train their volunteer leaders to acquire and use them effectively. This in turn will promote long term retention. Following are some of those skills that might be considered for volunteer leaders.

- conflict resolution
- developing interest and morale
- local recruitment
- effective training skills
- social interaction skills
- building effective teams

### Rural/farming versus metropolitan volunteer brigades

I believe that there is a real need to treat rural/farming brigades differently to metropolitan related brigades. As indicated earlier, most of our current volunteer retention problems are occurring in the smaller rural/farming brigades. Agencies need to closely monitor training levels, the effects of age and the numbers in smaller rural brigades and develop recruitment and retention strategies, which address these areas. Unfortunately, many of these problems are the result of economic and demographic changes that are beyond the control of any agency. In many instances all the agency will be able to do is apply 'band aid' solutions that will not address the underlying problems. For many small rural brigades amalgamations may be the only effective answer and in many areas it may require the development of new approaches if the agency is to provide adequate coverage.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I would state that in my view it appears that agencies and Governments have, to a degree, tended to take Emergency Service volunteers somewhat for granted. In a workload study of FRS volunteer brigades run by FESA in 1997/8 it was found that FRS brigades (who are mainly urban brigades) in total donated an average of 77.87 person hours per week to volunteer activities. This figure of 77.87 hours/week represented an average weekly contribution to the community of some \$1305 per brigade (ie as measured by multiplying these hours by the then base salary rate for firefighters). For the 92 urban FRS volunteer brigades this would have translated into an annual contribution or 'replacement cost' of some \$6.25m per year. For the WA community as a whole, this notional 'contribution cost for all Emergency Service volunteers would have been of the order of \$25-\$30m per annum.

Such figures must, of course, be treated with extreme caution, but they do provide us with a feel for the overall magnitude of the level of contribution made by volunteers to the community. In WA it is estimated that FESA has some 10,000 operationally active volunteers with another 10,000 being registered for insurance purposes. The contribution to the community made by these volunteers is enormous. I believe that it is in the interests of Emergency Service Agencies (and governments) to find out

as much as they can about their volunteer populations. It is suggested that research is needed to find out more about:

- why people become volunteers and why they stay
- what they like and dislike about their activities as volunteers
- what are the most effective advertising techniques to use when recruiting volunteers
- what are the major regional differences between volunteer groups
- literacy levels and literary problems amongst volunteers
- what are the major elements of effective volunteer leadership and how can it best be developed
- what are the key elements that make a successful volunteer brigade

There are obvious changes taking place in Australian urban and rural communities. These changes and their impact on volunteerism need to be monitored closely so that Agencies can respond appropriately in order to maintain a viable and efficient volunteer service. Basic research of the kind outlined above will provide tangible long-term savings to agencies. At the same time agencies should also internally monitor what is going on in their volunteer brigades. Volunteers are in one sense the agency's 'customers' and we must ensure that we cater to their needs and wishes and understand where they are coming from. Agencies must not get so far removed from their customers that they act like the Greenville County Department of Social Services in the United States, which in 1992 sent a letter to a resident two weeks after his death which contained the following:

*'Your food stamps will be stopped effective March 1992 because we have received notice you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.'*

Whilst at first glance the sentiments expressed in the letter appear to epitomise good customer relations one has to wonder about the Department's common sense in relation to every other aspect! Both the medium and the message must be carefully thought out and the needs and abilities of the customers carefully researched. Not to do so can be extremely costly in the longer term.

In this paper I have tried to show that retention of volunteers is not a matter that can be treated in isolation, but must be considered within the context of total volunteer management and administration. Retention is one aspect of what must be a totally integrated approach to volunteer management.