



**Submission to the
Department of Fire and Emergency Services**

**on the
Community Disaster Resilience Strategy**

March 2022

By email to: resilience@dfes.wa.gov.au

OVERVIEW

This submission responds to the “Community Disaster Resilience Strategy Discussion Paper” (Discussion Paper)¹.

Volunteering WA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for consideration and thanks the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) for their leadership and coordination in this area.

This submission provides a brief background on Volunteering WA including our role in the recruitment of spontaneous volunteers in disasters and the current state of volunteering in Western Australia. It addresses the key questions posed as part of the consultation.

In summary Volunteering WA:

- **supports the five outcome domains** outlined in the report;
- **suggests an additional transformation shift:**
 - to “Simplify and streamline emergency management” settings in Western Australia;
- **recommends that change initiative 1.3 be amended:**
 - from “Create more pathways to volunteer and help out in an emergency”
 - to “Adopt a systematic framework for the planning of spontaneous volunteers in incident response and recovery, to improve coordination, efficacy and provide a platform for continuous improvement”; and
- **recommends the provision of ongoing funding** to Volunteering WA to support the planning for and continuous improvement of the coordination of spontaneous volunteers in Western Australia.

1 About Volunteering WA

Established in 1988, Volunteering WA (VWA) is the peak body for volunteering in Western Australia. With a membership of over 750 volunteer-involving organisations we work in partnership with community, corporate, educational and government organisations to provide leadership, advancement and promotion of volunteering to achieve the greatest impact for Western Australia.

VWA has a 34-year proven track record of providing and sharing effective, efficient and innovative volunteer support services to meet the ever-increasing demand in our state for general and emergencies volunteering. Our purpose is to empower people and communities to enrich WA, and our vision is for a society in which everyone is inspired to make a difference.

Volunteering WA:

- represents volunteering across the State, including all volunteer involving organisations, and their 523,000 volunteers;
- supports over 750 member organisations to attract and manage volunteers and increase their capability and capacity;

¹ <https://semc.wa.gov.au/resilience>

- works closely with the Minister for Volunteering and the State Government to collaborate on the implementation of the State Volunteering Strategy 2018; and
- leads and hosts several events that celebrate and recognise the contributions of our volunteers, including the annual WA Volunteer of the Year Awards.

2 Current state of volunteering in Western Australia

Volunteering helps to build strong and resilient communities, encourages economic participation, promotes psychological wellbeing, and increases social inclusion and cohesion.

In 2020, 523,600 or 26% of all Western Australians volunteered through an organisation or group. There has been a significant reduction in formal volunteer participation in WA over the past six years, with over 151,000 fewer volunteers - a 22% reduction. This continues the trend first observed in 2019 (pre-COVID) and is consistent with national experience.

The loss of volunteer capacity is due to a number of reasons, including people become more time poor, fatigue due to the intense and prolonged nature of many emergencies (such as bushfires and COVID-19) and increasing requirements for training, administration and compliance. For example, almost half of the national aged care volunteer workforce was lost in the year to August 2021.

Interestingly, the rate of informal volunteering is higher – with 614,000 or 30% of the State’s population volunteering outside of incorporated associations or organisations. This volunteering is not covered by any legislative protections or provisions.

Changing our mode of working with informal spontaneous volunteers in disasters to harness their resources, skills and knowledge of community, is critical to help Western Australian communities become more resilient.

3 Volunteering WA and the recruitment of spontaneous and non-affiliated volunteers

Volunteering WA operates an emergency volunteering website², which enables people to lend a hand and register their details to become an emergency volunteer and assist those affected at times of need. Since the inception of the Emergency Support Volunteering [website](https://emergency.volunteer.org.au/) we have seen over 9,600 volunteers sign up to assist.

In 2021, we have provided ongoing support for COVID-19 impacted communities and assistance to those affected by Ex-Tropical Cyclone Seroja.

Although Volunteering WA was not officially activated by the Department of Communities (Communities), we self-activated to support and manage spontaneous and non-affiliated volunteers for the 2021 Woorloo Bushfire.

Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and Local Government Authorities were encouraged to register positions through this emergency volunteer portal. Over 700 volunteers registered to provide assistance during the period of activation. Volunteer roles filled included:

- BlazeAid - fence builders, administration assistant and food preparation; and

² <https://emergency.volunteer.org.au/>

- CWA Gidgegannup - donation sorting and passenger (volunteer) transport
- Sourcing offers of accommodation, on behalf of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), which was urgently required by the community and to house volunteers, resulting in 169 registrations of interest.

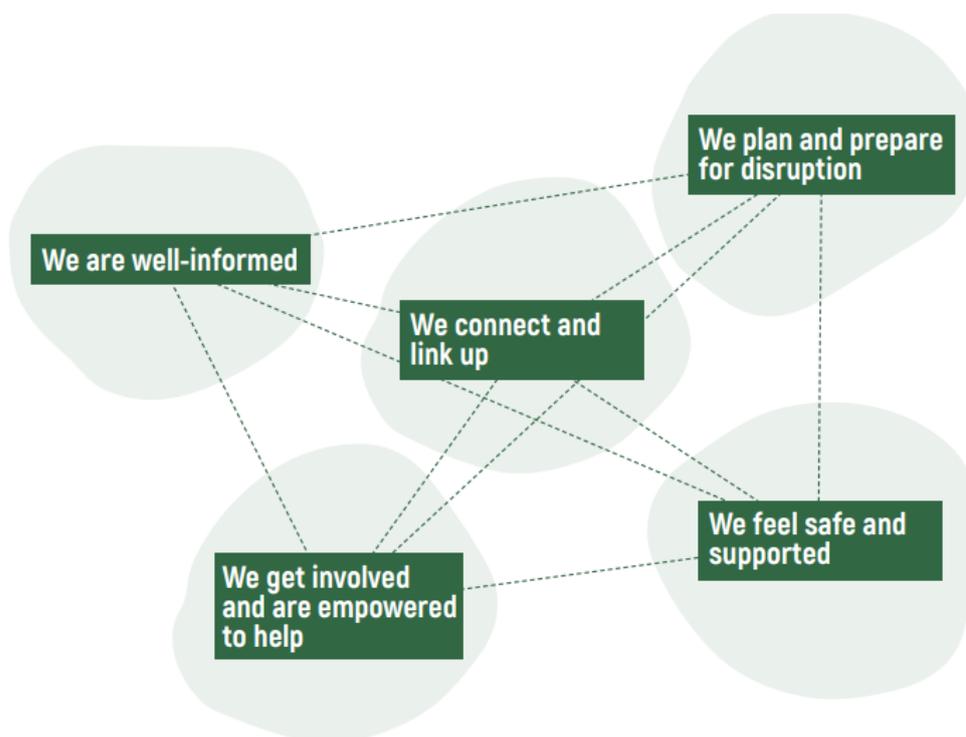
The State Government has recently provided over \$175,000 to Volunteering WA to develop the Volunteer Community Recovery platform further³. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) are working closely with Volunteering WA on this project.

Once completed, the operation of this platform needs to be integrated into the plans, policies and procedures of emergency management in WA.

4 Do the five outcomes represent the right goals for a resilient community?

Volunteering WA notes the basis for the proposed outcomes from consultation, lived experience and research.

We support the five outcome domains outlined in the report which reflect a shared commitment to resilience across Government, the for-profit and for-purpose sectors and the community.



5 Are the transformational shifts possible and are there any others that should be considered?

The draft strategy proposes four transformational shifts:

- Open up emergency management
- Work locally to increase preparedness

³ <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2022/02/Volunteering-WA-online-presence-to-be-boosted.aspx>

- Collaborate to reduce vulnerability
- Heal people and communities.

It notes that “The Emergency Management space is complex, with a multitude of layers, roles and responsibilities which make it harder for communities to get involved”.

Recommendation

Volunteering WA suggests a further transformational shift is urgently required:

- Simplify and streamline emergency management settings in WA

Discussion

The WA State Government has designated the Department of Communities (Communities) as the coordinator of welfare response in the event of an emergency. Communities can activate the State Welfare Emergency Committee to assist in the deployment of the State Support Plan - Emergency Welfare (SSP-EW) to coordinate and provide services.

Volunteering WA has the following functions under the SSP-EW⁴:

- provide a support officer/s as required;
- provide strategic policy and advice regarding the provision of volunteering services within the welfare; and
- in an emergency management environment
 - manage affiliated and spontaneous non-affiliated volunteers;
 - assist with other welfare functional areas where agreed.

The arrangements in Western Australia for emergency response and recovery are under review. Communities have suggested that Volunteering WA should be on the State Emergency Management Committee (“Strategic SWEC”)⁵.

However we have not been invited to any meetings of Strategic SWEC for some time. We have been invited to “Operational SWEC” (Communities) and Community Engagement and Resilience (DFES) meetings in 2021.

It is not clear to Volunteering WA if these two committees have overlapping roles and how this strategy from DFES interacts with Communities’ role in welfare response.

6 Do we agree with the change initiatives? Is the implementation plan practical?

The draft strategy proposes 20 change initiatives to support the achievement of the proposed transformational shifts which are then supported by a further 39 actions.

Of particular relevance to volunteering is change initiative 1.3.

⁴ <https://www.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/State-Support-Plan-Emergency-Welfare.pdf>

⁵ The full presentation presented by Dept of Communities in December 2021 is available here <G:\Govt - Federal, State, Local\State Government\Dept of Communities\SWEC\Draft Proposed Scaleable Partners Model for State-wide Emergency Welfare Responsev2.0 watermark2.pdf>

Co-design

Change Initiative	Lead actions
1.3 Create more pathways to volunteer and help in an emergency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene co-design group to develop volunteer continuum • Develop framework for management and roles of informal volunteers in EM • Map out required changes to EM framework

Recommendation

Volunteering WA does not support the current form of change initiative 1.3.

As an alternative, we suggest the adoption of a systematic framework for the planning of spontaneous volunteers in incident response and recovery, to improve coordination, efficacy and provide a platform for continuous improvement.

Discussion

ISO 22319 Spontaneous Volunteers defines spontaneous volunteers as an “*individual who is not affiliated with an existing incident response organisation or voluntary organisation but who, without extensive preplanning, offers support to the response to, and recovery from, an incident*”.

This Standard, to which Australia is a signatory, provides a systematic framework for the planning of spontaneous volunteers in incident response and recovery. It focuses on ensuring planning is risk-based and prioritises the safety of volunteers, the public and incident response staff. Key elements include:

Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • activate an organisation to take responsibility for leading, managing and coordinating spontaneous volunteers • understand the motivations of volunteers • clarify issues of liability
Planning and documenting a plan for spontaneous volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • define the relationship • understand the concerns of stakeholders • identify risks associated with tasks that are suitable • reduce risks • select (recruit) • coordinate • set expectations • monitor tasks • identify training needs • recognise and reward
Continuous improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess the impact • understand how to engage in longer-term recovery • encourage SVs to pursue organised volunteer roles • evaluate and continuously improve

Table 2

Recommendation

Volunteering WA should be provided with ongoing funding to support the planning for and continuous improvement of the coordination of spontaneous volunteers in Western Australia.

Discussion

Currently, there is no ongoing role for Volunteering WA in the prepare phase of emergency management in Western Australia, as our role commences with activation for a given emergency. As such, most of these activities are not undertaken or subject to continuous improvement.

The Emergency Services Volunteering platform, supported by the State Government as outlined, is not yet integrated into emergency welfare disaster and response planning in Western Australia.

Volunteering WA is only able to recover costs in the respond and recover phases of emergencies if activated for an emergency covered by the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangement, managed by the Commonwealth Government. These tend to be a very small subset of emergencies in which we are involved.

Spontaneous volunteers play a critical role in creating surge capacity to respond to emergencies in Western Australia. This is heightened by challenges of distance, sparse populations in regional and remote areas and the reliance in WA on volunteers in delivering essential services.

The current absence of investment in Western Australia in planning, and in some cases for response and recovery support, for the involvement of spontaneous volunteers:

- limits their contribution to individual emergency response;
- risks the safety of the volunteers and the public safety of communities;
- risks negligence of VIOs and governments engaging these volunteers;
- risks community disenchantment and unwillingness to volunteer in future disaster response; and
- may adversely impact participation in ongoing volunteer roles.

There is an urgent need to fund an ongoing role in Volunteering WA to facilitate increased preparation for the management of spontaneous volunteers, participation in relevant coordination forums, and the building of relationships, processes and knowledge to support.

It is expected that a relatively small recurrent investment would generate significant benefits to and reduce risks in the response to future emergencies in WA.

In closing

Volunteering WA very much appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission for consideration.

We would welcome further understanding, analysis and engagement with ourselves and the voluntary sector on any proposed changes.



Tina Williams

**Chief Executive Officer
Volunteering WA**