



**Submission to the
Independent Review of the 2021 Wooroloo Bushfire**

Response to the Terms of Reference

October 2021

By email to: woorooloreview@dpc.wa.gov.au

Overview

This submission responds to the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review of the 2021 Wooroloo Bushfire¹.

Together with all Western Australians, Volunteering WA was shocked by the ferocity, speed and level of threat posed by the 2021 Wooroloo Bushfire to life and property.

While we have some understanding of the devastating impact of this emergency to Wooroloo and surrounding communities – their families, communities, livestock and pets, businesses, sporting and other recreational facilities and to the natural and built environments - we also know that the path to full recovery is a very long and challenging one.

Volunteering WA is the peak body for volunteering in Western Australia, and through its role, strives to lead, advance, and enable volunteering across the State. Volunteers played (and continue to play) a critical role in the Wooroloo Bushfire emergency response and community recovery.

We recognise and extend our appreciation to ‘traditional’ emergency services volunteers and volunteer managers (involved in services such as bush fire and rescue services and state emergency services) in the Wooroloo Bushfire and the invaluable insight they provide. Matters pertaining to the involvement, maintenance, recognition and safety of these volunteers is paramount and are expected to be the subject of other submissions to this review.

Volunteering WA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Independent Review of the 2021 Wooroloo Bushfire panel for consideration, focusing on two key issues:

- WA State Government’s commitment to an improved technological platform to support the recruitment of spontaneous and non-affiliated volunteers, particularly in response and recovery stages; and
- the need for increased capacity in the preparedness phase of emergency management to plan for this involvement.

This submission is therefore particularly relevant to the following areas of the Terms of Reference:

3. Examine the effectiveness of interagency coordination during the response and initial recovery phases of the incident.
8. Provide a means for members of the public and other interested parties to make submissions to the Review and give these due regard in compiling its report.

¹ <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/independent-review-of-the-2021-wooroloo-bushfire/2021-wooroloo-bushfire-review-terms-of-reference>

Role of Volunteering WA in State Welfare Emergencies

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-EW²:

- 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.

Recruitment of spontaneous and non-affiliated volunteers in Wooroloo

Volunteering WA is a member of the Community Engagement subcommittee of Western Australia's peak emergency management body, State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC).

Volunteering WA operates an emergency volunteering website, 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](#) 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 Communities, we self-activated to support and manage spontaneous and non-affiliated volunteers for the 2021 Wooroloo Bushfire.

Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) Local Government Authorities were encouraged to register positions through the 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
- CWA Gidgegannup - donation sorting and passenger (volunteer) transport.

In addition, Volunteering WA was asked to source 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. ADRA has a role under the SSP-EW for assisting in the provision of emergency, short and medium term accommodation.

² <https://www.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/State-Support-Plan-Emergency-Welfare.pdf>

The nature of spontaneous volunteering in emergency situations

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*”.

There is growing interest in spontaneous volunteers and donors in emergency situations.

The Australian Journal of Emergency Management published a study “*Centralised coordination of spontaneous emergency volunteers*” in 2016³.

The study noted that governments had generally overlooked spontaneous volunteering when planning for emergencies and saw *them* “*as an unpredictable and uncontrollable nuisance and risk rather than as a legitimate part of response and recovery*”. The study noted four areas of challenges and risks in this type of model:

Engaging with volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • matching of volunteers with roles is resource intensive • need for adequate IT and storage • lack of awareness and training of prospective volunteers in emergency situations, risks and protocols • managing expectations and psychosocial needs of volunteers exposed to trauma
Engaging with VIOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • varying expectations, capacity and experience of VIOs and other organisations • developing or modifying roles to suit spontaneous volunteers • poorly managed spontaneous volunteering programs risk turning people away from other volunteering opportunities
Integration with the formal emergency system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • culture challenges • from command-control to a co-operative, resilience- based model of engagement • need to tailor roles to suit
Managing risks of Spontaneous Volunteer Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funding gaps to resource model • lack of clarity about liability as the coordinating organisation

Table 1

Our experience suggests that these learnings are transferable to Western Australia, with limited to no funding or capacity to support required improvements.

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297765155_Centralised_coordination_of_spontaneous_emergency_volunteers_The_EV_CREW_model

Key learnings

Key learnings from Volunteering WA's involvement in the 2021 Wooroloo Bushfire are consistent with other emergency response experience (such as for COVID-19 and the Yarloop bushfires). These are reflected in two central issues:

1. WA State Government's commitment to an improved technological platform to support the recruitment of spontaneous volunteers

When COVID-19 restrictions impacted Western Australia, over 65% of volunteer-involving organisations paused their volunteer programs virtually overnight. The demand for emergency relief services was high and the public wanted to help in any way they could, particularly those from lower-risk demographics.

Volunteering WA acted swiftly to harness the desire to help while ensuring organisations met the government's social distancing and hygiene restrictions. We provided online resources to assist organisations and established a system whereby people could express their interest in volunteering in COVID-related support roles that we then passed on to organisations in need.

A major challenge for Volunteering WA and the sector during the initial COVID-19 emergency was to respond quickly. Due to the limitations of Volunteering WA's current platform, we were forced to develop a new platform for the pandemic. The new community recovery volunteering database and website (linked above) provided the WA community with a portal to register themselves as volunteers during the COVID-19 emergency. Over 4,000 people registered, offering a helping hand to vulnerable people during the crisis.

This platform was also utilised for volunteer recruitment and VIO registration in the 2021 Wooroloo bushfire. However, technological innovation does not stand still.

In March 2021 and in response to our request, the McGowan Government committed to invest in improvements to this community recovery volunteering platform and database.

Increased automation and connecting volunteers to volunteer positions will streamline the process for both volunteers and volunteer involving organisation. The improved site will also provide greater support for volunteers in managing their various volunteer roles.

It is hoped that the new platform will enable VIOs and Local Government to:

- recruit from pools of volunteers ahead of an emergency situation; and
- provide the necessary training and induction to ensure volunteers are ready to be activated in times of emergency.

The pool of positions that can be shared will be determined by the availability and selection of volunteers that are able to meet the necessary criteria for specific roles.

This platform complements the WACOSS Community Organised Resource Exchange (CORE) website, which links businesses with charities and for-purpose organisations to facilitate the donation of surplus food, materials and logistics support. The CORE platform does not facilitate volunteer recruitment or matching, where specialist knowledge is required.

Volunteering WA supports the continued expansion of the CORE platform for use in emergency management, including the potential for linkages to the Emergency Support Volunteering website.

On completion, the new platform will also link to Volunteering WA's volunteer recruitment, volunteer management and youth volunteering platforms to facilitate ongoing volunteer involvement outside of emergency settings.

Subject to the formalisation of this funding (currently the subject of a formal application to Communities) the platform will support improved recruitment and matching of spontaneous volunteers in emergencies in Western Australia. The current timetable is for the development of this technology for use by June 2022.

2. The need for increased investment to support the preparedness phase of emergency management

ISO 22319 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

There is an expectation of a continued rise in the frequency, scale and complexity of emergencies in Western Australia. This is consistent with experience and forecasts both in Australia and around the world and is being driven by a combination of climate change, globalisation, population density, loss of the natural environmental and geo-political instability.

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.

Further, 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.

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. The

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 appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission for consideration.

We extend our best wishes to Wooroloo and other communities impacted by this emergency, for their ongoing recovery.

Volunteering WA looks forward to working closely with the WA State Government and the community to learn from this disaster to improve coordination and response of emergency management in Western Australia.



Tina Williams

**Chief Executive Officer
Volunteering WA**