

Connecting communities through volunteering: lessons learnt at NSW SES

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When the NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) is not responding to severe weather events, it is building capability through training and preparing our communities for the unexpected.

Like all volunteer emergency services agencies, traditionally NSW SES has relied on its members to be available regularly and commit to routine training. This can sometimes present a barrier for community members keen to contribute to the service. Recent research from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC shows a shift in volunteering within Australia is under way. Greater female participation in work activities, an ageing workforce, developments in technology and an increase in natural hazards are transforming local communities. In NSW, a growing population and impacts of climate change are likely to increase workload for volunteers. More frequent severe weather events will challenge the capacity of emergency services and volunteers who may sacrifice additional work and family time to contribute to response activities.

The NSW SES Volunteering Reimagined initiative recognises that local risks are best managed by local people with a range of volunteering options to ensure communities are prepared and help is available during emergencies. An increase in the flexibility of membership allows greater community volunteer participation.

NSW SES volunteers (unit members) are the backbone of the NSW SES. They are the first responders; the unit leaders and the teams who have the specialist skills to respond to, and coordinate a major emergency response. Previous attendance requirements have changed and a member's overall contribution to the NSW SES is recognised, leading to flexible volunteering opportunities. In smaller communities without a NSW SES presence, Community Action Teams (CATs) are being established to combat local risks. CATs undertake basic training and provide communities with early warning, assist with property protection and provide intelligence to Incident Management Teams.

During the response to major events, spontaneous volunteers often provide a valuable surge capacity to help the local community respond and recover. The NSW SES has developed processes and policies to effectively use these volunteers and has established partnerships with businesses and government agencies that can supply staff to assist during major events as corporate volunteers. These volunteers assist with basic tasks, or use their existing skillsets in a specialised position

to build service capability both operationally and during quieter periods.

What separates Volunteering Reimagined from a short-term recruitment drive is the ability to sustain learning from this innovative project and embed the new volunteering model into the culture of the organisation. NSW SES units have been offering more flexibility to existing volunteers for many years without formal support or resourcing. The project has formalised flexible volunteering arrangements and introduced new policies. Sustaining these initiatives over the long term will ensure the NSW SES and community realises the benefits.

Early input into the project from volunteers and community members ensured a workforce model that would be accepted by stakeholders. In addition to using industry research, the project team used principles of Human Centred Design to develop a greater understanding for some of the NSW SES volunteering challenges and encourage a design-thinking approach to solutions, which offers cultural challenges at a local level. Members have been challenged to think differently about who could be part of the volunteer workforce in line with the NSW SES's mission: saving lives and protecting communities. Volunteering Reimagined has spawned ideas at all levels of the service and as these ideas have evolved, so too has the framework in which ideas are managed. Ideas are developed with the relevant manager and prototyped early, enabling the NSW SES to learn quickly and improve with agility.

Long-held opinions of what volunteering involves can be difficult to change. Volunteering no longer requires the same commitment or level of training for every role. Sharing the success stories from members has been key to building a culture supportive of Volunteering Reimagined and doing things differently. The team used live videos on social media, travelled across NSW to capture digital content and stories and promoted volunteers as the spokespersons for the project. Complex messages were simplified using infographics and diagrams. Effective change management was important to ensure members remained engaged, were empowered to implement Volunteering Reimagined within their unit and had the information to quell any apprehensions.