Managing Emergency Services Volunteers

Tabled 5 February 2014
Background to the audit

• Volunteering is critical to service delivery.

• Value of volunteering is around $16.4 billion.

• Victoria has an active volunteer workforce.

• Around 1.5 million people volunteer in Victoria.

Factory fire at Dunlopillo Drive, Dandenong South. Photo courtesy of CFA.
Background to the audit

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) are the two largest volunteer-based emergency services organisations.

CFA

- The largest—around 57,000 volunteers.
- Operates outside of Melbourne metropolitan boundary.
- Responds to fires, bushfires and rescues, and provides fire awareness/education.

Gravity Zone factory fire Seaford.
Photo courtesy of CFA.
Background to the audit

**SES**

- Around 5,000 volunteers.
- Operates across the state.
- Responds to:
  - natural disasters such as floods and storms
  - road crash rescues.
- Performs search and rescue.

*Car crashes into Berwick bakery. Image courtesy of CFA.*
Audit objectives and scope

Audit objective
To assess whether CFA and SES effectively and efficiently manage emergency services volunteers.

Audit scope
- Planning around volunteer resource needs.
- Volunteer management around recruitment, support and retention.
- Volunteer training and education.
- Volunteer use and resource allocation.
Conclusions

• Neither CFA nor SES has a sound understanding of the total number of volunteers it needs.
• Recruitment practices do not assure that they are addressing workforce needs.
• Both agencies’ assessments of current workforce capability overestimate their ability to respond to emergencies.
• Volunteers are supported, but the reasons they leave are not well understood.
• CFA is taking action to address weaknesses, while SES has much work to do.
Findings – Workforce planning and need

- CFA and SES have limited awareness of volunteer workforce needs.
- CFA identifies the skills it needs, rather than the minimum number of volunteers it needs.
- SES identifies the number of volunteers it needs, but the data on what it has is unreliable.
- CFA and SES routinely recruit volunteers, but this is ad hoc and not informed by organisational need.
- Absent performance frameworks limit knowledge about the effectiveness of recruitment practices.
Findings – Volunteer training and deployment

- CFA and SES identify the skills and training needs of its volunteers.
- Training is provided, but is applied inconsistently within each organisation.
- Process weaknesses mean volunteer brigades (CFA) and units (SES) may not always have the capability they need.
- CFA and SES have unclear processes for allocating roles and deploying their volunteers.
- There is an absence of agency data on volunteer availability.
Findings – Volunteer support and retention

• CFA and SES have a range of volunteer support services.
• CFA’s are guided by an overarching strategy.
• SES’ are piecemeal and not linked to strategic objectives.
• CFA and SES experience volunteer turnover, although retention rates are much lower at SES.
• Neither agency has a sound understanding of the reasons why volunteers leave.

Line markers factory fire in Dandenong South. Photo courtesy of CFA.
# Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>recommendations</th>
<th>accept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That CFA and SES:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. improve their central and regional oversight of volunteer workforce management</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. develop recruitment and retention strategies to guide these activities centrally</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. implement risk management processes within regions, districts, brigades and units</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. evaluate volunteer support systems and processes</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. explore further opportunities to collaborate with each other.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Recommendations – continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Acceptance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>That CFA:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. develop exit surveys and associated management reports based on meaningful analysis</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. improve Brigade Operational Skills Profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability.</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>That SES:</strong></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. review and improve data quality around volunteer numbers and skills</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. improve ERAS-e profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. align ERAS-e profiles with its planning cycle.</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For further information on this presentation please contact:

Victorian Auditor-General’s Office
[p] 8601 7000