



Managing Emergency Services Volunteers



VICTORIA

Victorian
Auditor-General

Managing Emergency Services Volunteers

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The Hon. Bruce Atkinson MLC
President
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Melbourne

The Hon. Ken Smith MP
Speaker
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Melbourne

Dear Presiding Officers

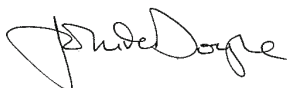
Under the provisions of section 16AB of the *Audit Act 1994*, I transmit my report on the audit *Managing Emergency Services Volunteers*.

The audit assessed whether the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) effectively and efficiently manage emergency services volunteers. It examined whether planning within these agencies adequately identifies and addresses volunteer workforce capacity and requirements.

The report identified deficiencies with CFA and SES's volunteer workforce planning as neither agency has a sound understanding of the workforce needed to fulfil their operational requirements. CFA does not know how many volunteers it needs and SES's data on how many volunteers it has is unreliable. Addressing these issues is critical to the long-term sustainability of these emergency services agencies.

Both agencies have responded positively to the report. CFA is in the process of implementing programs that aim to address concerns raised and SES has provided an undertaking to establish an action plan to address all recommendations.

Yours faithfully



John Doyle
Auditor-General

5 February 2014

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Auditor-General's comments



John Doyle
Auditor-General

The fifth anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires this week is a sobering but timely reminder of the crucial role that volunteers perform. They give their time, risk their safety and do an outstanding job protecting the lives and property of all Victorians.

In addition to the duties that we see them carrying out, such as firefighting, flood rescue and responding to storm damage and road accidents, other volunteers work tirelessly behind the scenes. They train regularly to maintain skills and also carry out administrative, recruitment and fundraising responsibilities. Volunteers are essentially unpaid professionals and valuable assets.

As shown by the Black Saturday bushfires, and more recently the bushfires in January 2014 and the floods of 2013, Victoria is prone to natural disasters. The regularity and severity of such events is predicted to increase.

Responding to these events falls mainly to two of Victoria's emergency services agencies—the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Victoria State Emergency Service (SES). Both agencies rely predominantly on volunteer workforces to carry out their responsibilities and provide essential services that would not be economically possible to provide with paid workforces. Consequently, it is appropriate that we look at how effectively emergency services volunteers are recruited, trained, deployed and retained.

Given the important role of volunteers, it is essential that CFA and SES provide adequate support to their volunteers during incident responses and with day-to-day activities such training, administrative support and counselling. The audit found that CFA is in the process of improving its support to volunteers through a coordinated set of programs aimed at assisting with volunteer recruitment, support and retention. However, SES's volunteer support programs are piecemeal and lack an overarching strategy.

In addition to supporting their volunteers, CFA and SES must be able to assure themselves that they have sufficient volunteers with the skills needed to respond to incidents. The audit found that there are issues with both CFA and SES's workforce planning. CFA does not know how many volunteers it needs and SES does not accurately know how many it has. Further, both agencies' procedures for analysing their volunteers' skills and qualifications are flawed, which hinders their ability to identify workforce skills gaps.

I am confident this report will contribute to improvements at CFA and SES that will assist these volunteers in carrying out their duties. I have recommended that both agencies evaluate their volunteer support systems and processes, and explore opportunities to collaborate with each other. Both agencies have accepted my recommendations and I am confident that SES will be greatly assisted by CFA, which is making strong progress towards its volunteerism support goals.

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Control Reviewer*

If applied, my recommendations will also provide CFA and SES with clarity on where workforce numbers and skills gaps exist. This will then enable CFA and SES to channel resources efficiently into the areas of most need, and provide greater assurance that both agencies have the workforces to respond to incidents.

Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria and staff of CFA and SES for their assistance during this audit.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Doyle', with a stylized, cursive script.

John Doyle
Auditor-General
February 2014

Audit summary

Volunteering is critical to the delivery of community services throughout Victoria. When volunteers provide their time and resources, not only do they help to deliver services and contribute to the community, they enable these services to be delivered more cost effectively than if delivered by a paid workforce. The most recent Victorian Government estimate of the value of volunteering in Victoria was made in 2006 and placed the value at around \$16.4 billion per year.

Volunteers give their time for different reasons, such as a sense of duty to their community, or a desire to help others, to learn and to develop themselves. Volunteerism also provides volunteers with an opportunity to connect with their community, creating a sense of belonging. Within rural communities, it is common for generations of families to volunteer with an organisation, with some volunteering for multiple agencies.

Victoria has a range of emergency services organisations. These include Victoria Police, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and Ambulance Victoria, which largely rely on a paid workforce. In contrast, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES), both of which provide emergency response services for natural disasters, rely significantly on volunteers.

CFA's volunteers number around 57 500, which includes 38 000 operational and 19 500 non-operational volunteers. Operational volunteers include firefighters, communications and emergency response officers and incident controllers. Non-operational volunteers perform a range of activities including community education, fundraising, management, recruitment and catering.

SES reports that around 5 000 volunteers perform a range of its operational and non-operational roles. Operational roles include general rescues and road crash rescues, search and rescue functions and even managing and directing traffic during emergencies. Non-operational roles include management and administration, media and public relations, fundraising and community education.

The audit objective was to assess whether CFA and SES effectively and efficiently manage emergency services volunteers. It examined whether the strategic and operational planning within these agencies was adequate to identify and address volunteer workforce capacity and requirements, including recruitment, retention and support.

Conclusions

Neither CFA nor SES have a sound understanding of the total number of volunteers needed to fulfil their operational requirements. CFA does not know how many volunteers it needs and SES's data on how many volunteers it has is unreliable. Both agencies' assessments of current workforce capacity overestimate their emergency response capabilities, meaning neither agency can be assured that it has the capacity to respond to incidents when they occur

CFA and SES's decentralised approaches to the recruitment, training and deployment of volunteers means neither agency can assure itself that these activities are effectively addressing workforce needs. CFA is in the process of implementing programs that aim to address these concerns, however, SES's attempts to resolve these issues are inadequate.

Addressing these issues is critical to the long-term sustainability of these emergency services agencies.

Findings

Workforce planning and need

Volunteer workforce planning is essential to develop an understanding of CFA and SES's capacity and capability to meet service delivery. It requires an evidence-based assessment of the current workforce capacity and capability, knowing the number of volunteers needed, and the gaps in capacity and capability.

Both CFA and SES have limited organisation-wide awareness of their volunteer workforce requirements.

While CFA currently has around 57 500 volunteers, it identifies only the number of volunteers with specific skills that it needs, rather than the minimum number of volunteers it needs to perform its functions.

SES identifies the number of volunteers it needs, and with what skills. However, SES's volunteer data is not robust enough to be confident about the actual number of volunteers it has. Without an accurate baseline, it is not possible for SES to know what the gap is, and therefore what more is needed.

Recruitment

Given the importance of volunteers to CFA and SES, recruitment should be a key part of CFA and SES's workforce planning. Recruitment should provide for a sustainable and capable volunteer workforce that is able to deliver the required emergency services.

While CFA and SES routinely recruit volunteers, neither agency has a coherent, documented strategy for volunteer recruitment that identifies the volunteers needed and the approaches required to address that need. Consequently, volunteer recruitment happens in an ad hoc way at the local—brigade and unit—level, with differing approaches to when and how volunteers are recruited.

Operational workforce needs, such as skills gaps at a brigade and unit level, are not considered in the recruitment planning process and there are no directions provided to brigades and units on workforce need and gaps analysis. While this analysis is conducted centrally and identifies skills gaps at a brigade and unit level, no guidance is given to brigades or units on how to apply this information.

The effectiveness of CFA and SES's recruitment practices is unclear. Given the disconnect between the locally identified needs and the recruitment practices, it is not possible to know whether, and to what extent, this need is being met. There is also no framework in place that informs management in CFA and SES about the performance of volunteer recruitment practices.

Training and deployment

Training is critical for emergency services volunteers given the dangerous nature of the work they do. Once trained, volunteers are a valuable resource and should be utilised to maximum effect. Accordingly, they should be matched to roles based on the skills, qualities and interests they possess.

CFA and SES have processes to identify the skills and training needs of its volunteers, supported by training strategies. However, weaknesses with these processes mean that brigades and units are unlikely to have volunteers available with the skills they need, when they need them.

To identify the skills and training required, CFA uses Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and brigade inspections. Brigade Operational Skills Profiles compare current skills and competencies with a brigade's identified minimum need. From this, skills and competency gaps and training needs are identified.

However, Brigade Operational Skills Profiles do not determine the number of members a brigade requires for overall viability. Also, they count non-active volunteer skills—volunteers who have attained competency but are no longer operationally active in that skill—which has the potential to overstate the number of volunteers who are available to perform a task, and they do not consider times of the day and week that volunteers are not available. This practice may give false assurance that a brigade has a capacity to respond, when it does not.

SES has processes that provide a summary of each unit's training needs by analysing the competencies held by each unit compared to the identified need. This occurs through Emergency Response Activity Standards – enhanced (ERAS-e) profiling. Like CFA, its processes do not account for volunteers who are non-active in a skill and do not consider times of the day and week that volunteers are not available. This has the potential to show that a unit has a full set of competencies when it does not.

Support and retention

CFA and SES volunteers perform dangerous and stressful work. To ensure the volunteer workforce remains effective and to increase the chances of retaining volunteers, strategies to support and retain volunteers are essential.

While CFA has implemented a Volunteer Support Program that focuses on volunteer development, sustainability and support, SES does not yet have such a strategy.

Brigade Administrative Support Officers for CFA, and Volunteer Support Officers for SES, provide non-operational support to brigades and units. Brigade Administrative Support Officers and Volunteer Support Officers can reduce the burden on volunteers, however, there is confusion about the purpose of these roles. In addition, both CFA and SES have peer support, chaplaincy and counselling services to provide health and wellbeing support for volunteers. CFA's program is built on a strategy that includes analysis of better practice and the evaluation of intervention practices. Both agencies provide a sound program of non-administrative support to volunteers.

Retaining volunteers gives both CFA and SES a ready and capable workforce, and is cheaper and faster than recruiting and training new volunteers. Understanding why volunteers leave an organisation is key to retaining them.

SES has no over-arching retention strategy. It conducts centralised exit surveys, but the survey and analysis are flawed and produce unreliable data. For instance survey options for leaving SES include: family/work balance or family/SES balance. This duplication of family reasons in two options makes it hard to identify the primary cause for a volunteer leaving. SES is in the process of implementing a number of initiatives, such as developing volunteer manuals. However there is no structure in place to monitor the implementation of these initiatives.

Currently, CFA does not centrally survey volunteers who leave, however, it has developed an action plan for retention which includes the introduction of exit surveys and a strategy to retain retiring operational volunteers as non-operational mentors. Given that the plan had not been implemented, its effectiveness could not be assessed.

Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Page
The Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service should:		
1.	improve their central and regional oversight of volunteer workforce management by strategically using the available information, such as volunteer demographic data, Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and ERAS-e profiles, and developing new information, such as risk assessment, to increase their awareness of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> actual and required volunteer numbers the gaps and risks around volunteer capability and capacity 	19
2.	develop recruitment and retention strategies to guide these activities centrally, regionally and at the district, brigade and unit level, so that approaches are consistent with the organisations' strategic goals	19
3.	implement risk management processes within regions, districts, brigades and units to understand and manage the local risks associated with their volunteer workforces	19
5.	evaluate volunteer support systems and processes	33
6.	explore further opportunities to collaborate with each other.	33
The Country Fire Authority should:		
7.	develop exit surveys and associated management reports based on meaningful analysis as a way to better inform it about the reasons that volunteers leave	33
8.	improve Brigade Operational Skills Profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability.	33
The Victoria State Emergency Service should:		
4.	review and improve data quality around volunteer numbers and skills	19
9.	improve ERAS-e profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability	33
10.	align ERAS-e profiles with its planning cycle.	33

Submissions and comments received

In addition to progressive engagement during the course of the audit, in accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report was provided to the Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service with a request for submissions or comments.

Agency views have been considered in reaching our audit conclusions and are represented to the extent relevant and warranted in preparing this report. Their full section 16(3) submissions and comments are included in Appendix A.

1 Background

1.1 Volunteering in Victoria

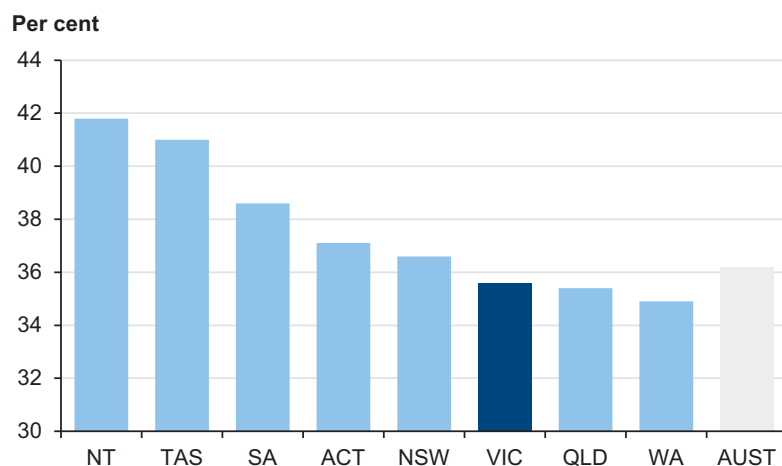
Volunteering is critical to the delivery of services throughout Victoria. When volunteers provide their time and resources, not only do they help to deliver services and contribute to the community, they enable these services to be delivered more cost effectively than if delivered by a paid workforce. The most recent Victorian Government estimate of the value of volunteering in Victoria was made in 2006 and placed the value at around \$16.4 billion per year.

Volunteers give their time for different reasons, such as a sense of duty to their community, or a desire to help others, to learn and to develop themselves. Volunteerism also provides volunteers with an opportunity to connect with their community, creating a sense of belonging. Within rural communities, it is common for generations of families to volunteer with an organisation, with some volunteering for multiple agencies.

1.1.1 Profile of Victoria's volunteers

Victoria has an active volunteer workforce, with a participation rate broadly consistent with other states and territories. Nationally around 36.2 per cent of the population over the age of 18 reported volunteering in 2010. As Figure 1A shows, Victoria's participation rate was 35.6 per cent, with a participation rate of 33.2 per cent for males and 38 per cent for females.

Figure 1A
Volunteer participation rate, 2010



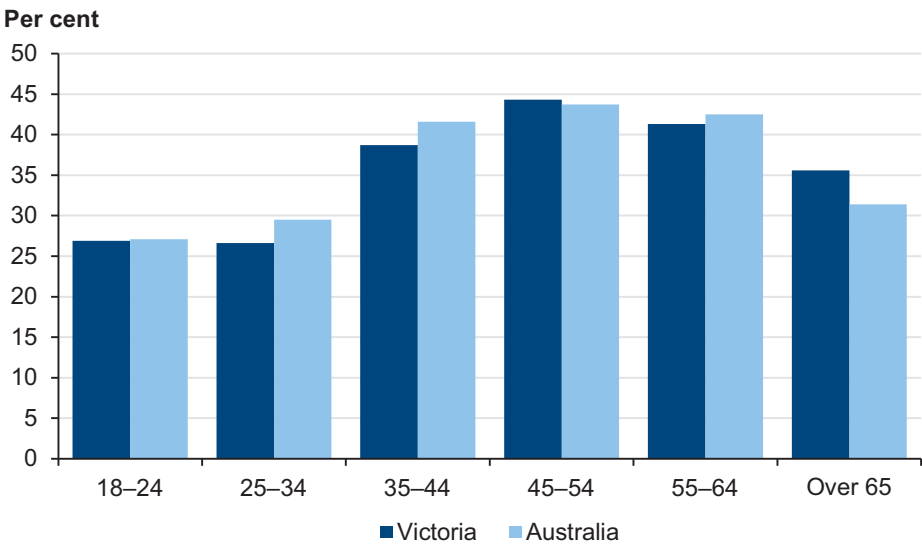
Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from *Voluntary Work. Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010.

The volunteer participation rate in Victoria is highest in areas outside of Melbourne, with a participation rate of 45.1 per cent, compared with a metropolitan participation rate of 32.6 per cent. In areas outside of Melbourne, females are far more likely to volunteer than males with a participation rate of 49.2 per cent compared with 40.4 per cent for males, while the difference is smaller for the metropolitan area—34.2 per cent for females and 31 per cent for males.

Victoria’s participation rate equates to around 1.5 million volunteers, of which 820 000—54.2 per cent—were female and 694 000—45.8 per cent—were male. This is also consistent with the national trend, where females make up 53.2 per cent of all volunteers, and males 46.8 per cent. Just over one million of the Victorian volunteers provided services in the metropolitan area, with around 465 000 providing services across the rest of the state.

Victoria’s volunteer population is ageing. As Figures 1B and 1C show, the majority of volunteers, by both proportion and number, are aged over 45 years, and rates of volunteer participation in people aged over 65 years are comparatively higher.

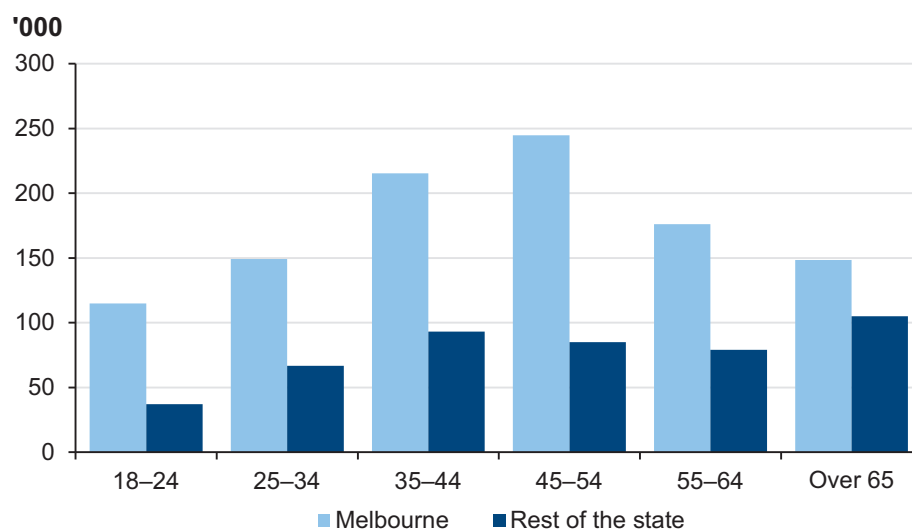
Figure 1B
Volunteer participation rate by age, 2010



Source: Victorian Auditor-General’s Office from *Voluntary Work. Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010.

Figure 1C shows that Victoria’s non-metropolitan areas are more reliant on older volunteers, with 23 per cent of their volunteers aged over 65 years, and 58 per cent of their volunteers aged over 45 years. This compares with around 14 per cent of metropolitan volunteers being over 65 years, and around 54 per cent of volunteers being over 45 years.

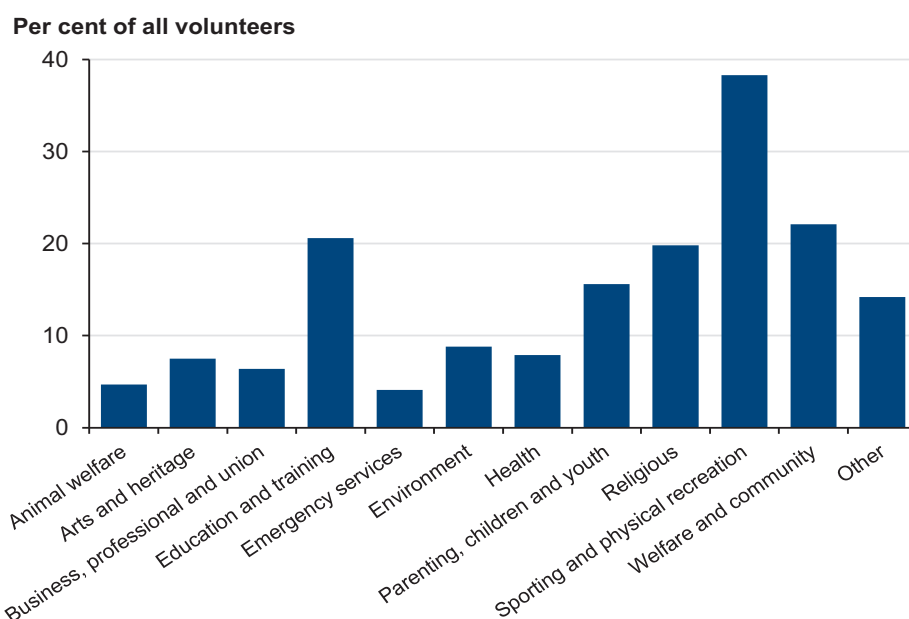
Figure 1C
Victorian volunteer numbers by age and location, 2010



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from *Voluntary Work, Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010.

Figure 1D shows that the highest volunteer participation occurs in sporting and physical recreation organisations, followed by welfare and community organisations, education and training organisations, and religious organisations. Victorian participation is generally consistent with participation nationally.

Figure 1D
Volunteer participation by organisation type, 2010



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from *Voluntary Work, Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010.

Victoria's emergency services organisations have the lowest volunteer participation rate, at just 4.1 per cent. Nationally the volunteer participation rate in emergency services organisations is 6.9 per cent.

1.2 Volunteer-based emergency services

Victoria has a range of emergency services organisations. These include Victoria Police, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, and Ambulance Victoria, which largely rely on a paid workforce. In contrast, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES), both of which provide emergency response services for natural disasters, rely significantly on volunteers.

1.2.1 Country Fire Authority

CFA is Victoria's largest volunteer-based emergency services organisation and is constituted under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*. CFA provides statewide fire and related emergency coordination, excluding the metropolitan fire district and public lands. It responds to bushfire, structural fire, road rescue and technical rescue such as trench or mine operations, hazardous materials transportation and storage incidents. CFA also assists with other emergencies, such as floods.

In non-emergency situations, CFA provides:

- community awareness, education and safety programs
- input to fire safety planning for major community risks
- technical services, such as building code-related inspections, post-incident analysis and fire investigation.

Volunteers

CFA relies on volunteers and paid staff—both career firefighters and support staff—to undertake its duties. CFA's volunteers number around 57 500, which includes 38 000 operational and 19 500 non-operational volunteers.

Within CFA, operational volunteers have, as a minimum, successfully completed Minimum Skills Wildfire firefighter training.

There are a wide range of non-operational roles within CFA that are undertaken by both operational and non-operational volunteers. These include:

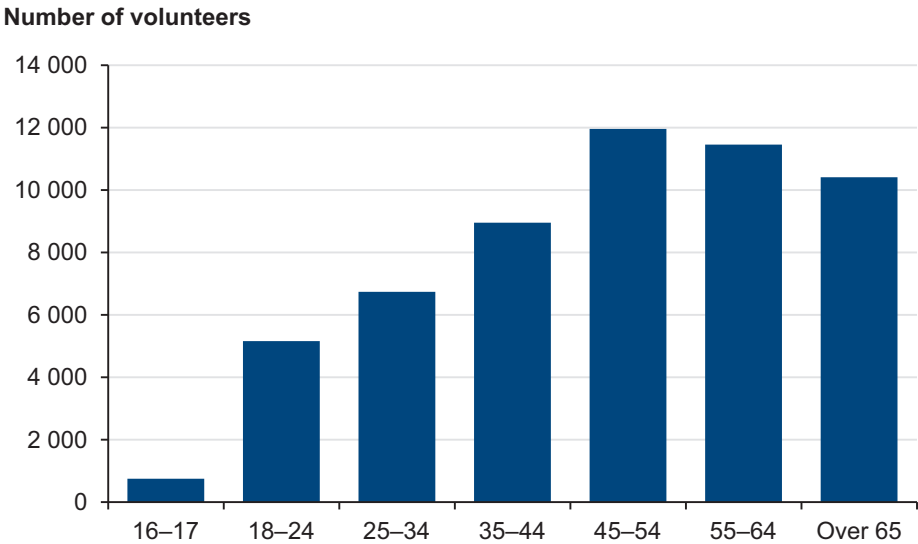
- community education and development
- community safety and protection
- community communications and promotional activities
- recruitment and people management
- peer welfare support
- critical incident peer support
- catering
- brigade administration and finance
- training
- infrastructure and equipment maintenance and support.

Many non-operational roles also require prerequisite training, such as community educators.

Complementing the CFA's volunteers are around 1 875 paid employees. This includes 815 operational staff—including career firefighters—and around 1 060 support staff. Paid employees represent around 3 per cent of CFA's workforce.

While the CFA relies heavily on its volunteers, an ageing volunteer cohort and the regional population decline present sustainability challenges. As Figure 1E shows, around 58 per cent of CFA's volunteers are aged over 45 years, 30 per cent are aged over 55 years, and 16 per cent are aged over 65 years. CFA's profile is consistent with that for volunteers more broadly, particularly for the demographic aged over 45 years.

Figure 1E
Age profile of Country Fire Authority volunteers, June 2013



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from Country Fire Authority data.

Volunteer Charter

CFA's commitment to its volunteers is also outlined in the Volunteer Charter (the Charter) which is an agreement between the State of Victoria, CFA and Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria on behalf of volunteers. Under the Charter, CFA recognise and acknowledge that a primary responsibility of CFA and people employed by CFA is to nurture and encourage volunteers and to facilitate and develop their skills and competencies. The Charter is included in the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (the Act).

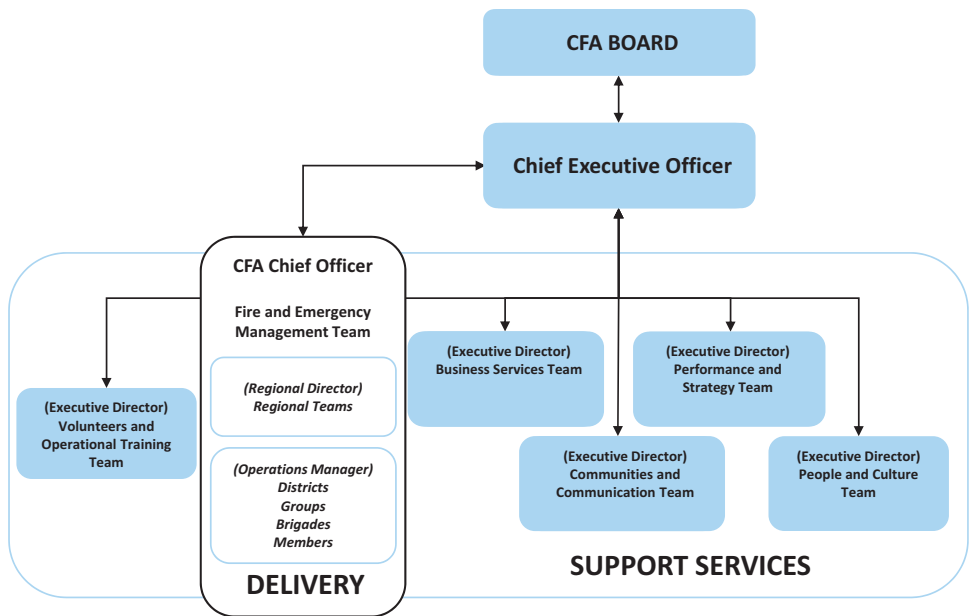
Section 6F of the Act reinforces the Charter, it states that CFA 'is first and foremost a volunteer-based organisation, in which volunteer officers and members are supported by employees in a fully integrated manner'.

Organisational structure

CFA's structure under the board has a Chief Executive Officer and consists of six directorates. The Chief Executive Officer is responsible to the board for carrying out all CFA's statutory functions—including all activities across the six functional directorates. The Chief Officer leads the Fire and Emergency Management function within CFA and has important statutory obligations to fulfil; this is emphasised in the organisational structure with the role of Chief Officer being given a prominence over other Executive Director roles.

The most senior position a volunteer can attain is that of Chair of the Board. There are four positions on the CFA Board that are filled by volunteers through a nomination and subsequent ministerial approval process.

Figure 1F
Country Fire Authority organisational structure



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from Country Fire Authority data.

CFA has eight regions, 20 districts, approximately 140 groups and 1 219 brigades.

Regions

Regional offices provide support to brigades and are responsible for regional strategies, business planning, the delivery of services, local resources, budgets, expenditure and performance management.

There are five non-metropolitan regions and three metropolitan regions. Each region's structure varies according to demographic needs, however, all are consistent with CFA's overall corporate structure. Each region has a Regional Director who is responsible for managing the area's non-operational functions, including the provision of training, equipment and community education, and the management of occupational health and safety. Each region also has district-based Operations Managers who are responsible for fire and emergency management within each district of the region.

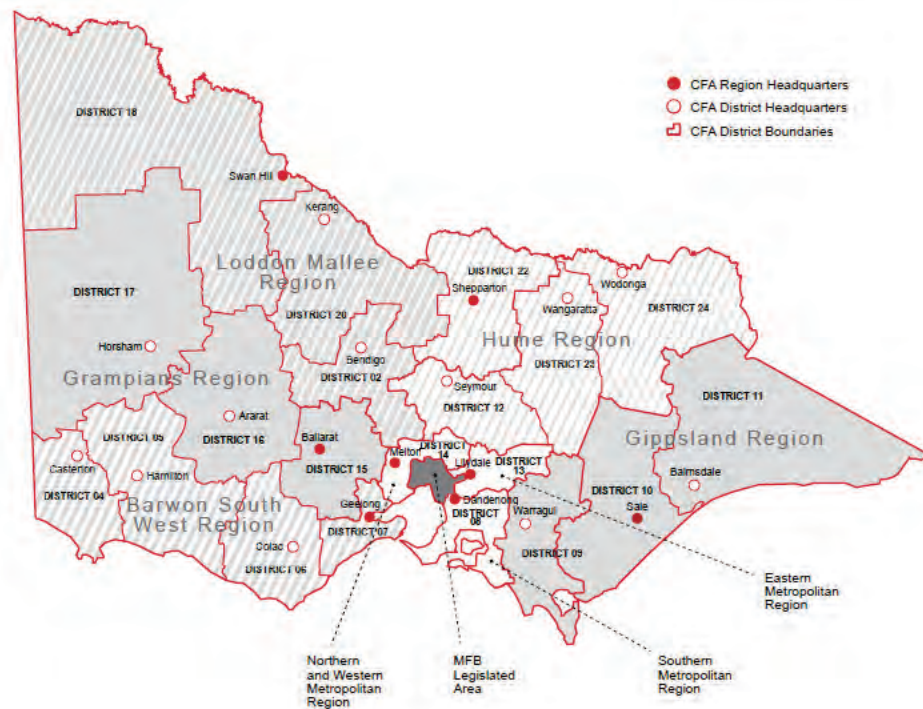
CFA's metropolitan responsibilities are generally confined to outer metropolitan areas, as determined by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade's boundaries. In the south east, CFA is responsible for areas such as Dandenong, Springvale and beyond, in the north, areas such as Epping and in the west, areas such as Caroline Springs and Point Cook.

Districts

Districts manage and coordinate groups and brigades, community consultation and incident control and command. Districts are managed by Operations Managers who are regional operational staff. These managers are responsible for the operations of brigades including the management of volunteers and career firefighters within their district.

CFA has 20 districts that are made up of an average of six groups and 60 brigades. Figure 1G shows the distribution of districts across CFA's eight regions.

Figure 1G
Country Fire Authority distribution of regions and districts



Source: Country Fire Authority 2012–13 Annual Report.

Groups

Groups are responsible for forming strike teams during larger incidents, including coordinating brigades, performing incident control and command, and providing administration and logistical support.

Groups are led by Group Officers, which is the highest operational rank a volunteer can achieve. Group Officers are elected by brigade delegates biennially. In addition to Group Officers, each group has:

- an appropriate number of deputy group officers as approved by CFA
- a group communications officer
- a group secretary.

CFA has over 140 groups across the state each made up of around 10 brigades that service areas with similar geographical characteristics, usually based on local government boundaries.

Brigades

A brigade's purpose is to attend fires, alarms of fires and other incidents under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*.

Brigades staffed fully by volunteer are managed by Brigade Captains—a volunteer who is elected biennially by the brigade members. Integrated brigades—with volunteer and career firefighters—are managed by an Officer in Charge, a career firefighter who has achieved a rank of Operations Officer. Brigade Captains and Officers in Charge are supported by 1st, 2nd and 3rd Lieutenants—4th and 5th Lieutenants may also be appointed in some circumstances. Lieutenants are volunteer roles.

CFA has a total of 1 219 brigades—1 187 fully volunteer and 32 integrated brigades, which include 17 coastguard flotillas and 23 forest industry brigades.

Organisational change

CFA is in the process of changing its organisational structure. The new structure will have five regions and 20 districts. Each region will be led by an Assistant Chief Officer who will have lines of operational command and control. Consultation on these changes has been completed and progressive implementation has commenced.

1.2.2 Victoria State Emergency Service

SES is Victoria's control agency for floods, storms, tsunamis and earthquakes. It helps communities to prepare for—and manages responses to—these emergencies. SES also operates a road crash rescue network, assists Victoria Police in search and rescue operations and supports other agencies during major bushfire responses.

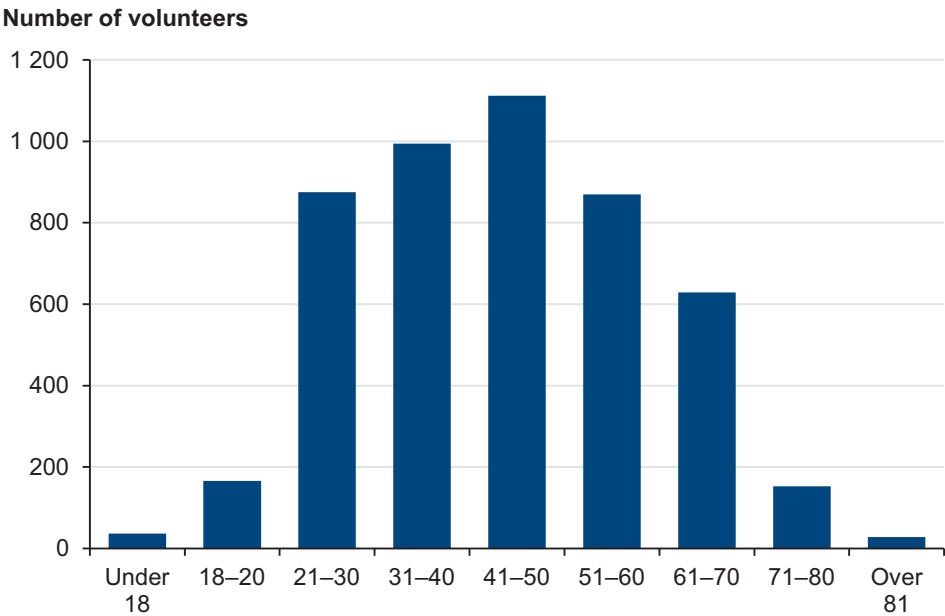
Volunteers

SES reports that around 5 000 volunteers perform a range of operational and non-operational roles. Operational roles include general rescues and road crash rescues, search and rescue functions and even managing and directing traffic during emergencies. Non-operational roles include management and administration, media and public relations, fundraising and community education.

Supporting SES’s volunteers are around 150 paid staff located primarily in SES’s head office and also across its six regions. Paid employees represent around 3 per cent of SES’s workforce.

Like CFA, SES has an ageing volunteer workforce. As Figure 1H shows, the majority of its volunteers—around 58 per cent—are aged over 40 years, 35 per cent are aged over 50 years and 17 per cent are aged over 60 years. SES also faces sustainability challenges with the regional population decline and its high volunteer turnover rate—26.5 per cent in 2012–13, compared to CFA’s 1.6 per cent for the same year.

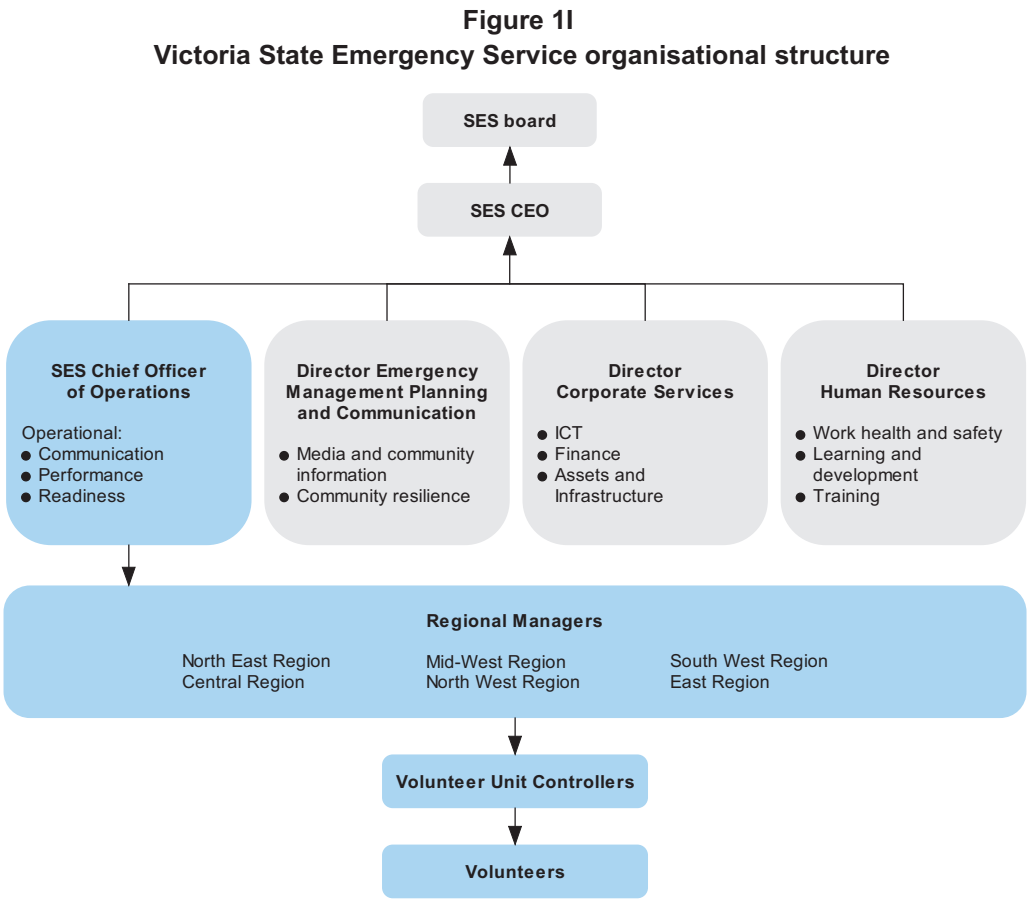
Figure 1H
Volunteers by age group, 30 June 2013



Source: Victorian Auditor-General’s Office from Victoria State Emergency Service data.

Organisational structure

SES has a Chief Executive Officer who is supported by a Chief Officer of Operations and three divisional directors—operations, emergency management planning and communications, corporate services and human resources. SES’s Chief Executive Officer is responsible for the organisation’s overall performance including recruitment, day-to-day management and the training of volunteers. SES’s Chief Officer of Operations is responsible for the development of operational doctrine and overseeing incident management capability development within SES. Unlike CFA, SES’s structure does not provide its Chief Officer of Operations with an elevated corporate profile. Figure 11 outlines the structure:



Source: Victorian Auditor-General’s Office from Victoria State Emergency Service data.

SES has six regions comprised of 142 units.

Regions

Regional offices provide support to units, including incident management, volunteer training, community education and administrative support.

Each region has a Regional Manager who is responsible for both the operational and non-operational functions of the region. Regional Managers are supported by a team of staff who are structured according to the needs of the region.

Units

Units are responsible for local level operations, training and administration. Figure 1J outlines a unit's functions.

Figure 1J
Victoria State Emergency Service unit functional tasks

OPERATIONS	ADMINISTRATION	TRAINING
Operational Readiness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crews Ops Support Duty Officer/Media Incident Reporting Comms Plans Operations Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Education Preparedness plans Logistics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equipment Operations Communications Vehicles 	General Administration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> OHS Reporting/auditing/action plans PPE distribution Membership records Correspondence/ distribution of information Public Relations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PR/ Media SES Awareness Fundraising Catering Finance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finance Facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LHQ Facility Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information Communication Technology (ICT) People <ul style="list-style-type: none"> People Management/ HR Inductions Recruitment Succession Planning/personal development Relationship Management 	Programme Coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> OHS Programming/ Coordination Training records Training delivery Assessors Competency maintenance Trainer Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train the trainer Mentoring

Source: Victoria State Emergency Service Unit Management Manual.

All units are managed by volunteer Unit Controllers who are appointed by Regional Managers biennially. Unit Controllers may appoint one or more Deputy Controllers to assist with the management of the unit. Unlike CFA, all SES units are entirely staffed with volunteers.

1.3 Audit objective and scope

The audit objective was to assess whether CFA and SES effectively and efficiently manage emergency services volunteers.

The audit examined CFA and SES, which are Victoria's largest emergency services volunteer agencies. It examined whether the strategic and operational planning within these agencies was adequate to identify and address volunteer resourcing requirements, including the capacity and capability of the volunteer workforce.

Specifically, the audit examined the effectiveness of volunteer management strategies relating to attraction, recruitment, retention and support. The audit also examined the adequacy and effectiveness of training and education, as well as the effectiveness of volunteer utilisation and resource allocation.

1.4 Audit method and cost

The audit used desktop research, document and file review, and interviews with volunteers, agency staff and stakeholders.

The audit also conducted site visits of 13 brigades, 10 units and eight regional offices across metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas for CFA and SES.

The audit was conducted in accordance with the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards. Pursuant to section 20(3) of the *Audit Act 1994*, unless otherwise indicated any persons named in this report are not the subject of adverse comment or opinion.

The total cost of the audit was \$385 000.

1.5 Structure of the report

The report is structure as follows:

- Part 2 examines volunteer workforce planning, including its effectiveness in identifying capacity requirements and recruiting to meet need.
 - Part 3 examines the sufficiency, availability and standard of volunteer training, the utilisation of volunteers, volunteer support and retention.
-

2 Volunteer workforce planning and recruitment

At a glance

Background

Volunteer workforce planning is essential for agencies that rely heavily on volunteers to perform their core functions. Effective planning enables agencies to assess whether they have the volunteer capacity and capability to meet current and future demands, and to develop strategies to address any identified needs and gaps.

Conclusion

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) do not adequately plan for sustainable and capable volunteer workforces and nor do they effectively manage volunteer recruitment.

Findings

- Neither CFA or SES has a sound understanding of the total number of volunteers needed to fulfil their operational requirements.
- Recruitment activity by both agencies is ad hoc and not informed by a sound understanding of capacity, capability and need.
- Recruitment is not guided by a coherent, documented strategy.

Recommendations

CFA and SES should:

- improve their central and regional oversight of volunteer workforce management, to increase their awareness of:
 - actual and required volunteer numbers
 - the gaps and risks around volunteer capability and capacity
- develop recruitment and retention strategies to guide these activities centrally, regionally and at the district, brigade and unit level, so that approaches are consistent with the organisations' strategic goals
- implement risk management processes within regions, districts, brigades and units to understand and manage the local risks associated with their volunteer workforces.

SES should review and improve data quality around volunteer numbers and skills.

2.1 Introduction

Volunteer workforce planning is essential for agencies that use volunteers to perform their core functions. Effective planning enables agencies to assess whether they have the volunteer capacity and capability to meet current and future demands, and to develop strategies to address any identified needs and gaps.

2.2 Conclusion

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) do not adequately plan for sustainable and capable volunteer workforces and nor do they effectively manage volunteer recruitment. Neither agency has a sound understanding of the total number of volunteers needed to fulfil their operational requirements. Recruitment activity by both agencies is ad hoc and not informed by a sound understanding of capacity, capability and need. Recruitment is also not guided by a coherent, documented strategy.

2.3 Workforce planning and need

Relying on volunteers to perform organisational functions, as CFA and SES do, may bring with it service delivery risks, and requires that both agencies have an in-depth understanding of the capacity, capability and competency of their volunteer workforces.

Volunteer workforce planning is essential to develop this understanding. It requires an evidence-based assessment of current workforce capacity and capability based on competency, including knowing the number of volunteers and the nature of their skills, knowing where they are needed and knowing the gaps in capacity and capability. It also requires a sound understanding of the risks associated with volunteer workforces.

Neither CFA nor SES has effective volunteer workforce planning processes, with limited analysis of their current workforce, weaknesses in identifying the number of volunteers they need, and inadequate risk management processes. In addition, neither has strategic recruitment strategies or practices to support sustainable volunteer workforces.

2.3.1 Understanding volunteer workforce needs

Knowing how many volunteers are needed, and where they are needed, is a fundamental part of workforce planning. This should enable management to allocate resources to meet that need and increase the likelihood that services will be delivered as intended.

Neither CFA nor SES has a sound understanding of the number of volunteers they need, or where they are needed. Responsibility for identifying workforce requirements resides with regions for SES and with regions and districts for CFA, rather than centrally. Consequently, senior management of both organisations have limited awareness of volunteer workforce requirements across the whole organisation.

Country Fire Authority

CFA currently has around 57 500 operational and non-operational volunteers, which has remained relatively constant over the past decade. In its 2012–13 annual report it identified a target of 57 000 volunteers—in essence the number of volunteers it believes it needs. However, CFA does not have processes to identify the number of volunteers it has, so the basis of this number is unclear.

Rather, CFA identifies the number of people with specific skills that it requires through Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and brigade inspections which are legislated under section 29 of the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*. While these provide partial information about need, they do not enable CFA to understand how the organisation is placed or enable it to appropriately recruit volunteers, nor do these identify the number of people it requires to perform its functions. Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and brigade inspections are discussed in Part 3 in relation to volunteer training.

Victoria State Emergency Service

SES reports that it has around 5 000 operational and non-operational volunteers. In its 2012–13 annual report, SES identified a target of 4 377 operational volunteers.

The origins of this number are also unclear and SES advised that it did not know what it was based on. While SES has systems and processes to enable it to identify the required number of volunteers, through Emergency Response Activity Standards – enhanced (ERAS-e) profiles, these were only implemented in 2013. Before that, SES had no apparent process to determine the number of volunteers it needed.

Emergency Response Activity Standards – enhanced profiles

ERAS-e profiles identify workforce and skills gaps for each unit. They examine four areas of a unit—the size, vehicles, competencies and equipment. They also assess whether a unit is viable, its strengths, areas for improvement and key activities to focus on over the next five years. In this respect the process differs from CFA processes as it focuses on total numbers, and includes operational and non-operational volunteers.

However, there are data reliability issues with ERAS-e profiles, resulting in inaccurate data on the number of volunteers that SES has. The origins of these data reliability issues are not clear and SES has no current strategy in place to address them. Without an accurate baseline, it is not possible for SES to know what the gap is and therefore what more is needed.

SES's annual reports state that each year between 2008–09 and 2011–12 it had 5 500 volunteers. As Figure 2A shows, this data differs from the data that SES reported to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, with differences ranging from 1 000 to 1 500 less volunteers, for three of the past four years.

The data in its 2012–13 annual report also differs. SES reported that it had 5 000 volunteers, with Budget Paper 3 reporting stating that it had 3 684 operational volunteers. Separate advice provided for the audit identified 367 non-operational volunteers, bringing the total volunteers in 2012–13 to 4 051.

Figure 2A
Victoria State Emergency Service reported volunteer numbers

Year	Volunteer numbers as in annual reports	Volunteer numbers as reported to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
2007–08	5 500	not reported
2008–09	5 500	4 035
2009–10	5 500	4 258
2010–11	5 500	4 538
2011–12	5 500	not reported

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

2.3.2 Workforce planning data

Both CFA and SES collect other workforce data that could be used to inform them about volunteer workforce requirements. This data includes volunteer ages, sex, location, length of service and status—for example operational, non-operational and rank.

However, neither CFA nor SES uses this information for volunteer workforce planning and to understand issues that affect volunteers, such as geographical gaps and demographic risks.

Both agencies could use this data to identify trends in factors like volunteer age or length of service, which should guide workforce planning and recruitment actions.

VAGO's analysis of CFA and SES data showed, for example:

- at CFA, the volunteer population is ageing, with non-metropolitan areas having a greater number of older volunteers than metropolitan areas. This has implications for sustainable workforces in rural areas and for CFA's ability to deliver services
- the majority of SES volunteers stay with the organisation for between two and five years, highlighting potential retention issues and the need to address this.

As a consequence of not using this data for planning, CFA and SES have a limited understanding of their projected workforce needs.

2.3.3 Understanding workforce planning risks

Risk management is a key part of effective governance and an important factor to consider as part of planning. Given the reliance CFA and SES have on volunteers, combined with factors such as an ageing volunteer population and diminishing regional populations, understanding the risks around volunteer management is essential for volunteer workforce planning.

Both organisations have identified risks relating to volunteers in their corporate risk registers, to different extents. However, neither organisation clearly linked their risk assessments to their volunteer workforce planning.

Country Fire Authority

CFA identified risks relating to volunteers and managed these centrally in five of the eight regions. Three regions did not have documented risk assessments.

Centrally, CFA identifies the lack of investment in volunteerism and the impacts of this on CFA's ability to deliver its mission as the only risk relating to volunteers. Its mitigation strategies included starting the volunteer support program, implementing recommendations from external reviews and the implementation of an operational training strategy. Five of CFA's eight regions carried out risk assessments relating to volunteers, including a range of demographic factors. CFA should ensure volunteer risk assessments are carried out in all its regions.

Victoria State Emergency Service

Centralised risk assessments only occurred at SES in a limited way. Operational and strategic risks relating to volunteers were not identified at the regional or unit level. The only risks relating to volunteers identified by SES are:

- volunteers not being fit for duty
- volunteers not being available to meet core functions.

The causes of the first risk, fitness for duty, were identified as being the changing demographic of volunteers and unclear fitness for duty standards. However, planned actions to address these risks all relate to work health and safety—increasing education and implementing a reporting system. None are directed at the causes.

SES identified the causes of the second risk, volunteer availability, as including changing demographics, competition from other volunteer organisations, volunteers being unable to commit to training and employers being less flexible. The mitigation strategies for this risk include:

- the implementation of a recruitment, retention and recognition strategy
- the implementation of ERAS-e profiles
- use of Operational Information Management System data—an IT database that includes resource management, incident management and reporting, and training systems
- ongoing training and the volunteers online website.

The recruitment, retention and recognition strategy has not yet been developed, despite the SES risk register recording it as complete. It is unclear how the other mitigation strategies directly address the causes of the risk and what impact the mitigations have or are expected to have on the level of risk.

2.4 Recruitment

Given the importance of volunteers to CFA and SES, effective recruitment needs to be a key part of workforce planning. Recruitment should provide for a sustainable and capable volunteer workforce that is able to deliver the required services. Recruitment should include consistent organisation-wide practices, informed by evidence-based strategies.

While CFA and SES routinely recruit volunteers, neither agency uses a strategic or coordinated approach. Rather, recruitment is ad hoc and is managed at the local brigade and unit level, taking into account local community capacity and workload without consideration for the strategic needs of the organisations.

2.4.1 Recruitment strategies and guidance

In place of a strategy, CFA and SES rely on guidance targeted at the local level. Both agencies have developed guidance for Brigade Captains (CFA) and Unit Controllers (SES) to plan for recruitment. At CFA this includes a Brigade Management Manual and a Recruitment and Retention Guide, while SES has a Unit Management Manual. This guidance typically covers things like identifying recruitment needs, developing recruitment plans and undertaking recruitment activities.

While the guidance is a positive initiative, it is not an adequate replacement for a comprehensive strategy. Critically, volunteer operational workforce needs identified through Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and section 29 inspections, and workforce gaps identified through ERAS-e profiles, are not always considered by brigades and units in the recruitment planning process, and there are no directions provided to brigades and units on their use.

Consequently, there is inconsistent use with some brigades and units using these inspections and profiles to inform recruitment while others do not—resulting in an ad hoc approach to recruitment that is not informed by volunteer workforce needs assessments. CFA and SES cannot be assured that any recruitment planning by brigades and units is sufficiently robust and considers these gaps.

2.4.2 Recruitment planning and practices

Recruitment is ad hoc, it occurs in isolation at the local level without considering the strategic objectives of districts, regions and central offices. There are a number of inconsistencies in recruitment planning and practices at CFA and SES:

- Volunteer selection can range from informal conversations with Brigade Captains or Unit Controllers, to requesting resumes and undergoing a formal interview process with an interview panel.
- Some brigades and units target recruitment to address gaps while others recruit more broadly and retrospectively fit recruits into required roles.
- Some brigades and units recruit only when members are needed, however, others recruit regularly, regardless of skills gaps.
- Some brigades and units review and determine the most appropriate method for advertising recruitment, while others follow previous practices.

These inconsistencies can be attributed to a number of factors that are applicable to both organisations. Recruitment planning is not a mandatory requirement of CFA or SES's recruitment processes. Brigades and units have likely been given this discretion because they have different needs arising from their different circumstances, such as community demographics, geographical location and number and types of call outs.

Recruitment planning, if it occurs, is also dependent on the capability and capacity of Brigade Captains and Unit Controllers, as well as the level of support they get from CFA Brigade Administrative Support Officers, and SES Volunteer Support Officers.

2.4.3 Evaluating recruitment outcomes

The effectiveness of CFA and SES's recruitment practices is unclear. Given the disconnect between the workforce skills needed and recruitment practices, it is not possible to know whether, and to what extent, this need is being met. There is also no framework in place to inform management at CFA and SES about the performance of volunteer recruitment practices.

The current approach of brigades and units determining recruitment methods, which for CFA includes an annual audit process of brigades, enables them, if effective, to meet local needs. However, there is insufficient centralised recruitment and workforce planning and oversight to ensure that recruitment is targeted to address gaps or to meet strategic objectives.

CFA and SES central offices should play a more active role in recruitment planning, and work more closely with brigades and units to provide constructive guidance on recruitment approaches that have been effective.

Recommendations

The Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service should:

1. improve their central and regional oversight of volunteer workforce management by strategically using the available information, such as volunteer demographic data, Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and ERAS-e profiles, and developing new information, such as risk assessment, to increase their awareness of:
 - actual and required volunteer numbers
 - the gaps and risks around volunteer capability and capacity
2. develop recruitment and retention strategies to guide these activities centrally, regionally and at the district, brigade and unit level, so that approaches are consistent with the organisations' strategic goals
3. implement risk management processes within regions, districts, brigades and units to understand and manage the local risks associated with their volunteer workforces.

The Victoria State Emergency Service should:

4. review and improve data quality around volunteer numbers and skills.

3 Deploying and supporting volunteers

At a glance

Background

In addition to having the right number of volunteers in the right places, volunteer organisations also need to be able to appropriately use those volunteers to enable the organisation's core functions to be performed. This requires needs-based training, and also mechanisms to support volunteers so they are able to continue volunteering.

Conclusion

While systems and processes are in place to train, deploy and support volunteers, their effectiveness and efficiency is uncertain. Neither the Country Fire Authority (CFA) nor the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) is able to assure itself that its training, deployment and retention practices are effective and that it has the volunteer workforce needed to carry out its emergency response roles.

Findings

- CFA and SES training needs analyses are flawed as they count the qualifications of non-active members and they do not consider the times of the day and week that volunteers are not available.
- A lack of centralised training strategies at both CFA and SES has impeded the maturity and consistency of training delivery.
- CFA and SES do not have centralised strategies on the use and deployment of volunteers.
- SES has retained far less volunteers over a five-year period than CFA.

Recommendations

- CFA and SES should evaluate volunteer support systems and processes, and explore further opportunities to collaborate with each other.
- CFA should develop exit surveys and associated management reports as a way to better inform it about the reasons that volunteers leave, and improve Brigade Operational Skills Profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability.
- SES should improve ERAS-e profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability, and align ERAS-e profiles with its planning cycle.

3.1 Introduction

In addition to having the right number of volunteers in the right places, volunteer organisations also need to be able to appropriately use those volunteers to enable the organisation's core functions to be performed. This requires needs-based training, and also mechanisms to support volunteers so they are able to continue volunteering.

3.2 Conclusion

While systems and processes are in place at the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) to support, train and deploy volunteers, their effectiveness and efficiency is uncertain. There is little focus on volunteer retention and little understanding of the reasons why volunteers leave. Consequently, neither agency is able to assure itself that its recruitment, training, deployment and retention practices are effective and that it has the volunteer workforce needed to carry out its emergency response roles.

3.3 Training and deployment

Training is critical for emergency services volunteers given the dangerous nature of the work they do. Volunteers must be trained to acceptable standards and must maintain competency in their skills. A person needs to meet the minimum competency to become a volunteer for operational deployment and once trained is a valuable resource and should be utilised to maximum effect. Volunteers should be matched to roles according to the skills, qualities and interests they possess.

While CFA and SES have processes to identify volunteer training needs, weaknesses in these processes limit the effectiveness of training programs. Further, CFA and SES have no formal processes on the allocation and deployment of volunteers and, in some areas, are restricted by a lack of available community members who can become volunteers. However, weaknesses with CFA and SES's processes mean that brigades and units may not at times have available volunteers with the skills they need, when they need them.

3.3.1 Volunteer training needs

Country Fire Authority

At a strategic level, CFA's training is guided by the recently completed *Fire and Emergency Management Training Strategy 2013–18*. The strategy aims to better align training to operational need by having operational staff, rather than non-operational staff, drive the planning and achievement of training goals in partnership with brigades and groups.

The strategy has six key focus areas:

- Fire and Emergency Management Service delivery priorities
- leadership
- how people learn
- facilities and equipment
- flexible learning delivery
- training consistency.

Operationally, CFA's training is informed by identifying skills and training needs through Brigade Operational Skills Profiles (BOSP) and brigade inspections.

Brigade Operational Skills Profiles

A BOSP is completed annually for each brigade in CFA. The main purpose of the BOSP is to analyse the skills and competencies within a brigade and identify its training needs. The BOSP sets a minimum number of members that should hold a particular skill or competency, such as using a breathing apparatus or having a truck licence. A brigade's skills and competency needs are set based on an analysis of the type and number of incidents it responds to. It compares a brigade's needs with the actual skills and competencies in the brigade to determine if there is a shortfall.

There are weaknesses with BOSP as its reported summary figures include support members that are no longer operational. This can inflate the reported number of active firefighters, and a brigade may not have the number of skills or competencies reflected in the BOSP. For example, one brigade's profile identified 50 members with wildfire competencies but only 28 of those members were active. CFA has identified this weakness and has started to address it by reviewing BOSPs, with the aim of implementing new processes in early 2014.

BOSP also does not reflect a brigades' ability to respond at particular times of the day or days of the week. This is an issue in regional or remote areas where active members may commute to another town for work and be unavailable during the day. This can result in towns not having an appropriate level of fire response available at all times.

Some districts have recognised these weaknesses with BOSP and have amended their BOSP analysis to reflect members that are no longer operational. One district visited during the audit reconfigured BOSP to enable the examination of volunteer availability times. CFA's Operational Training and Volunteerism division had also recognised these weaknesses with BOSP and is in the process of reviewing and rolling out a revised BOSP process in 2014.

Brigade inspections

Brigade inspections are legislated under section 29 of the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* and require the Chief Officer to inspect, or arrange for the inspection of, all brigades annually. Brigade inspections analyse five areas of brigade performance; training, operational readiness, response performance, fire ground performance and brigade viability. Brigade inspection reports identify overall skills gaps by comparing ideal skill numbers to actual numbers.

Brigade inspection reports also set a standard for performance and compare it to actual performance. A summary and analysis of performance trends from the brigade inspection reports is formulated centrally and provided to CFA's board. From these summaries, the regions identify brigade viability risks and formulate action plans. Viability risks refer to risks that impact a brigade's capability and capacity to meet community needs, and might include brigade leadership issues, membership levels and an ageing brigade membership.

Brigade inspections establish the number of operational members, crew leaders and operational members with specialist skills required by a brigade. However, this does not equate to the full number of members a brigade requires for overall viability.

Brigade viability depends on other factors, often non-operational, such as whether the brigade has the capacity to carry out its administrative functions, including member management and support, and community education and resilience activities. CFA has not established the number of non-operational members required to undertake these tasks and maintain overall brigade viability. Without this information, CFA cannot accurately identify resource gaps and develop targeted responses to address brigade viability issues.

Victoria State Emergency Service

SES is in the process of developing its *Learning and Development Strategy 2013-2015*. The strategy aims to expand member participation in training through:

- innovative approaches
- providing learning pathways to support workforce development in operational and non-operational core skills
- enhancing quality management systems
- contributing to a unified approach to learning and development across Victoria's fire and emergency services.

This strategy does not contain information on the key drivers or challenges that the organisation faces in rolling out learning and development. Further, its key performance indicators do not contain measurement benchmarks against which SES can assess the successful implementation of the strategy.

The strategy does not offer a sound framework for learning and development in SES because the strategy's approaches and measures do not address its goals. For instance, while one of the strategy's goals is to explore innovative approaches to learning, the only approach identified is e-learning. Another goal aims to develop learning pathways in operational and non-operational core skills, however, the approach and measures do not address non-operational roles. The strategy also aims to achieve timeliness of learning and development activities, however, there are no strategic objectives, actions and measures focusing on timeliness.

Emergency Response Activity Standards – enhanced profiles

At the operational level, SES's Emergency Response Activity Standards – enhanced (ERAS-e) profiles—in addition to being designed to identify the number of volunteers needed—may be used by regions and units to inform training. ERAS-e profiles compare the competencies held by each unit to the identified need and summarise each unit's training requirements.

Like CFA's processes, ERAS-e profiles do not account for a unit's ability to respond at particular times of the day or days of the week. They also may not reflect actual member numbers and skills as they do not take into account volunteers who have a qualification or skill but cannot use it, for instance when a member is no longer physically able to perform that skill. This has the potential to show a unit has a full set of competencies when it does not.

ERAS-e profiles are a new process and are reliant on accurate unit profile input from the regions. These profiles were not completed until July 2013 and were therefore too late to feed into any training analysis for 2013–14.

3.3.2 Delivering volunteer training

Both CFA and SES train their volunteers so they have the appropriate qualifications and skills required to perform core organisational functions. However, the maturity and consistency of training processes varies across CFA and SES.

Country Fire Authority

CFA's current training program is inconsistent as all regions undertake training activities differently. Volunteer access to essential training facilities is limited as career firefighter training is prioritised.

CFA is currently consulting on a proposed process to centralise some functions that are currently being delivered by its regions, such as finance, human resources and training. Under the proposed structure, all aspects of training will all be managed centrally. This new structure should ensure that training aligns with operational needs and provide greater flexibility in the allocation of resources to areas of need. As this proposal was in the process of consultation, its effectiveness was not examined in the audit.

Training materials and guidance

CFA has a range of training materials available online, however, there is limited information provided on how a course should be run, including the length of time it should take. Figure 3A demonstrates inconsistencies in duration of courses as scheduled by two regions. Given a volunteer at one brigade can gain a competency in less time than a volunteer at another brigade, this raises concerns about the adequacy of the shorter courses and whether volunteer time is being used efficiently on longer courses.

Figure 3A
Course duration comparison

Course name	Loddon Mallee	Hume
Drive Off Road	21 hours	One weekend (16 hours)
Class A Foam	12 hours	One day or half a day plus an assignment
Advanced Pumping	24 hours	Two days (16 hours)

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

CFA's proposed centralised training model should give it more control and oversight to standardise processes and training across the organisation. Its training strategy also provides a good basis for training material to become more consistent.

Mobile props

Firefighters need to train in 'hot fire' situations to gain practical experience of fire behaviour. CFA has a range of training grounds that volunteers can use to practice 'hot fire' situations. However, career firefighters are also trained at these facilities and so training places are limited for volunteers. Some volunteers also do not have the time to attend one of these training facilities.

To address the restricted availability of 'hot fire' training for volunteers, CFA has introduced mobile 'hot fire' props that are delivered to brigades. Volunteers have been very positive about these props and reported that they have had the added benefit of connecting brigades because they are sharing and training on the props together. Volunteers saw this as an important benefit as during large scale incidents these brigades will be fighting fires side-by-side.

Victoria State Emergency Service

SES's volunteer training is delivered by regions and units. Given this devolved system, it is important for SES to provide appropriate guidance to ensure consistent delivery of training across the agency. However, SES provides only limited guidance and its training manual is outdated, resulting in inconsistent training practices across SES.

Training and Assessment Procedures Manual

With over 100 units delivering training and six regional offices overseeing unit training and supporting training across the organisation, ensuring that everyone has access to up-to-date training material should help to ensure a degree of consistency in training.

SES has a Training and Assessment Procedures Manual, which is a single source of reference on training safety, delivery, records, career progression, assessment and the recognition of prior learning. However, the Training and Assessment Procedures Manual was last reviewed in July 2010 and some of the information is now outdated.

Regional and unit training

SES holds courses mostly on weekends for volunteers. Many of the volunteers state that it is difficult to attend training on the weekend due to their location and other commitments. Volunteers expressed a clear preference for training to be held on weeknights.

The amount of weekend and evening work that training officers conduct is limited, which impacts the number of courses that can be run at times suitable for volunteers. This results in less access to courses for volunteers.

Each unit provides training on skills maintenance to ensure volunteers remain competent in their skills. SES does not provide central guidance to units on how often to train and what to train on, each unit determines this. In determining how often to train, Unit Controllers told us that they have to find a balance between ensuring the unit maintains competency and not overburdening volunteers with training. This is particularly important in small communities where SES volunteers are involved with other community groups. This process has resulted in some units training more regularly than others.

Volunteers are required to attend 60 per cent of unit-based training to be considered active. Unit Controllers can have them removed from the unit if they do not meet this requirement. Consequently, volunteers based at units who train more often must attend greater amounts of training and give up more time to maintain their operational membership status. While more regular training may be necessary for units who carry out complex rescues such as road rescues, SES has no central oversight upon which to assess unit training adequacy and appropriateness.

3.3.3 Using volunteers

CFA and SES should have strategies on how to utilise volunteers to ensure that their volunteer workforces are being used to greatest capacity. Brigade Captains and Unit Controllers are responsible for volunteer utilisation, however, neither CFA nor SES has clear processes on how volunteer role allocations and deployment should occur.

CFA and SES delegate volunteer role allocations to Brigade Captains and Unit Controllers who allocate roles in various ways depending on management style, volunteer numbers and volunteer interest. The audit found that brigade and unit needs often dictated a volunteer's role and then training was provided to skill the volunteer into that role.

There is no analysis of the external skills and experience volunteers bring to CFA and SES and how those skills and experience can be best matched to volunteer roles. This is a missed opportunity for CFA and SES.

CFA and SES do not have data on volunteer availability—time of day, day of week or seasonal availability. While some brigades and units do collect and use such information for deployment, there is no strategic approach to this. Such information is critical for operational purposes and to assure CFA and SES that they have adequate workforces to respond to events. This is a weakness that both organisations need to address. This is a particularly critical issue for SES, which has identified that it has limitations on how it can perform its role based in part on how it uses and deploys its volunteers.

In an organisational health review following the 2010–11 floods, SES found that its systems and people were geared towards day-to-day response activities and that its systems, processes and people are not scalable for major incidents. The review concluded that SES could not have managed the response to the 2010–11 prolonged and large-scale floods without the assistance of other emergency services organisations.

3.4 Support and retention

Whether operational or non-operational, volunteers perform critical roles for CFA and SES. The nature of the work, whether firefighting, responding to disasters or attending road accidents, can be dangerous and stressful. To ensure the volunteer workforce remains effective and to increase the chances of retaining volunteers, strategies to support and retain volunteers are essential.

3.4.1 Volunteer support strategies

SES does not have a strategy on volunteer management, support and retention, despite its corporate documents indicating otherwise. The absence of a guiding strategy in this important area of volunteer management is significant.

In the absence of a strategy, SES has a number of ad hoc programs and projects such as peer support, volunteer support officers, human resources policies and an occupational health and safety framework. While these are important, they are not a replacement for an overarching strategy.

Without a strategy, these programs and initiatives are piecemeal projects with no centralised structure in place to monitor their success against strategic objectives. There is no evidence that they work collectively towards achieving SES's objective—that its 'volunteer workforce is appropriately supported and resourced' as stated in its Corporate Plan.

CFA implemented a Volunteer Support Program in July 2013, which focuses on volunteer development, sustainability and support. The program has nine project areas including volunteer leadership, wellbeing, training, recruitment, retention and recognition, and growth and decline.

When completed, the Volunteer Support Program should provide a centralised strategy aimed at addressing the issues raised in this section.

3.4.2 Supporting volunteer managers

CFA Brigade Captains and SES Unit Controllers are responsible for the day-to-day management of volunteers. These are important roles, responsible for managing the operational aspects of the brigades and units, and also leading, managing and supporting other volunteers. However, neither CFA nor SES has strategies for brigade and unit management, such as facilitating management training for captains and controllers.

CFA has commenced mentoring and succession planning for Brigade Captains. This process involves CFA identifying future volunteer leaders and pairing them with mentors—usually current Brigade Captains. The aim is to ensure that when a Brigade Captain retires, there is a fully prepared candidate to take on the role.

Brigade Captains and Unit Controllers can also develop volunteers to take up more senior roles as a form of recognition. There was no documented evidence of volunteer development or succession planning at brigades and units visited. Succession planning and developing future managers and leaders is an important part of any organisation. This is particularly critical for CFA and SES, given their ageing volunteer workforces and for SES given its relatively high turnover.

3.4.3 Administrative and volunteer support

Brigade Administrative Support Officers (BASO) for CFA, and Volunteer Support Officers (VSO) for SES, provide frontline administrative support to brigades and units. If they are used effectively and efficiently BASOs and VSOs can reduce the administrative burden on volunteers and enable brigades and units to be self-sufficient.

CFA and SES regions manage BASO and VSO activities and performance. The roles have evolved since their inception, growing and changing in order to suit volunteer requests and needs. While the fluid nature of these roles is good for volunteer support, it has resulted in role confusion within CFA and SES, which potentially undermines the usefulness of these positions.

Volunteers consider the BASO and VSO roles to be a resource to assist with the administrative duties they do not have the capacity to do. At four of CFA's eight regions and three of SES's six regions, BASOs and VSOs variously saw their role as an administrative support to volunteers, as an enabler to self-sufficiency and a mixture of the two.

CFA and SES do not collect or analyse data on BASO and VSO roles, such as the types and number of tasks they carry out, which brigades and units require more assistance, or volunteer feedback on BASO and VSO performance. Such data and analysis would provide valuable opportunities to assess whether the BASO and VSO roles are effective, efficient, and distributed according to need.

Both CFA and SES have peer support, chaplaincy and counselling services in place to provide health and wellbeing support for volunteers. Peer support roles are also volunteers, and this enables them to relate to the issues faced by volunteers who seek help. CFA's program is built on a strategy that includes analysis of better practice and the evaluation of intervention practices. Both agencies provide a sound program of non-administrative support to volunteers.

3.4.4 Volunteer performance

Recognising and managing volunteer performance is challenging for both CFA and SES. Volunteers who are not performing to the required standard can, for example, pose potential risks to other volunteers where processes are not followed or where they are not adequately skilled in using equipment.

Being volunteer workforces, it is unrealistic for either agency to establish performance standards. What CFA and SES can do is to ensure that volunteers are attending training and are competent in their skills. Both agencies have training systems that record what qualifications each volunteer holds. Also, CFA's brigades are able to record their volunteers' ongoing skills maintenance for critical skills in a central database, WebTrain. However, SES does not capture its volunteers' level of current competency in the skills that they are qualified for. Training attendance is not recorded centrally by CFA and SES. Rather, it is recorded using log books at brigades and units.

Volunteer underperformance is difficult to measure and manage in CFA and SES. There are limited mechanisms for these agencies to manage volunteers out of brigades and units, except in circumstances where members have committed a crime or pose a threat. Available mechanisms include cancelling memberships when members have been absent for an extended period of time, or when members are not meeting training requirements.

In CFA, Brigade Captains have discretion over the frequency of reviewing and maintaining brigade membership lists. There is no central oversight to ensure that operational members are attending training organised by the brigade and maintaining competency of their qualified skills.

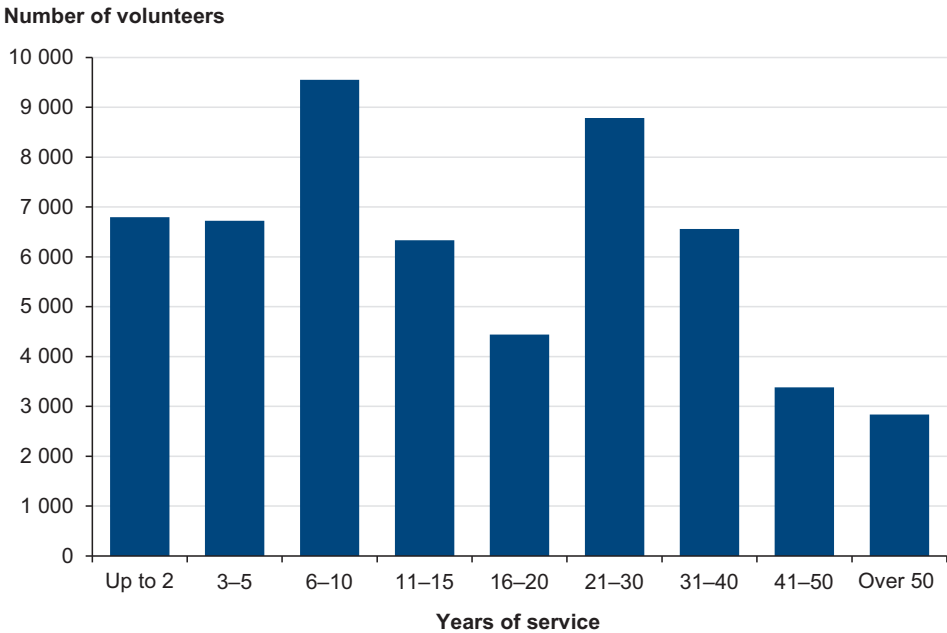
3.4.5 Volunteer retention

Retaining volunteers gives both CFA and SES a ready and capable workforce that is prepared to respond to emergencies. High volunteer turnover increases the risk of agencies not being adequately prepared to respond to emergencies and increases the cost, effort and time needed to recruit and train new volunteers. CFA and SES not only rely on portions of their volunteer workforces for their day-to-day activities, but can also call on their entire volunteer workforce to provide a surge capacity over protracted lengths of time for major incidents and to provide assistance to other emergency services agencies.

As Figures 3B and 3C show, retention differs markedly between CFA and SES, with CFA's volunteer retention greater than at SES. Around 50 per cent of SES's volunteers have been members for less than five years and almost 70 per cent have been a member for less than 10 years. Whereas, at CFA, 24 per cent of volunteers have been members for less than five years, and 41 per cent for less than 10 years.

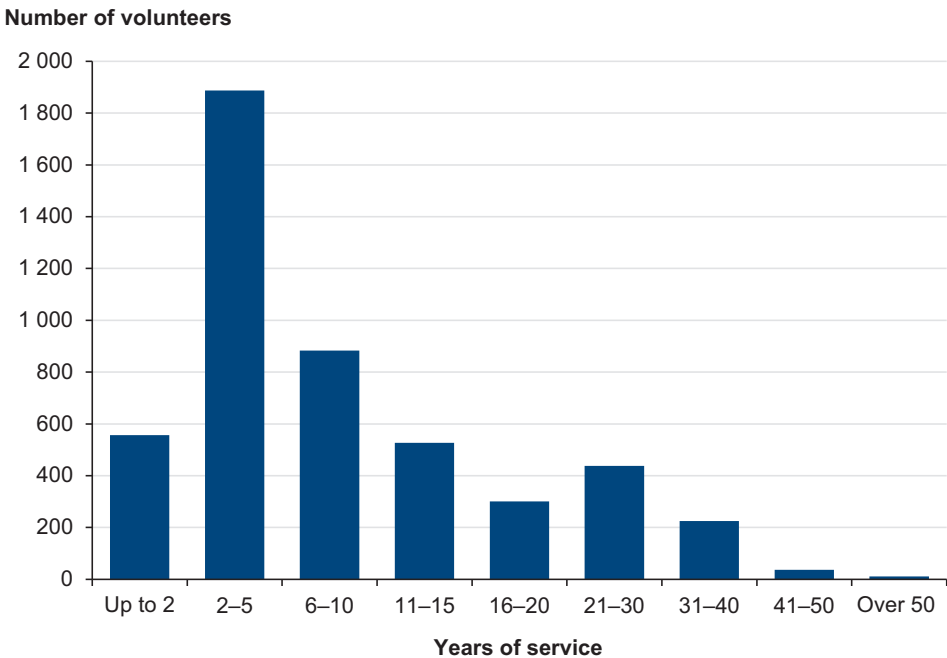
SES is less able than CFA to retain its volunteers long term. Around 39 per cent of CFA's volunteers have been members for longer than 21 years compared to 14.6 per cent of SES's members.

Figure 3B
Country Fire Authority volunteer years of service



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from Country Fire Authority data.

Figure 3C
Victoria State Emergency Service volunteer years of service



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from Victoria State Emergency Service data.

CFA and SES have a limited ability to control involuntary resignations such as those caused by volunteers relocating or having family and job commitments. However, voluntary resignations can be addressed by agencies and are regarded as an indicator of an agency's organisational health, particularly in relation to its management and support of volunteers.

Understanding why volunteers leave an organisation is a key part of retaining other volunteers.

One of the main tools for gathering information on why volunteers leave is exit surveys. Centrally, CFA does not conduct exit surveys, and therefore cannot demonstrate that it has a good understanding of why volunteers leave the organisation. However, CFA has developed an action plan for retention. The plan includes the introduction of exit surveys and a strategy to retain retiring operational volunteers as non-operational mentors.

SES conducts exit surveys, analyses survey findings and provides reports to SES central and regional offices. However, SES cannot demonstrate that it is effectively addressing retention issues. Exit surveys do not adequately capture the reasons for volunteers exiting the organisation. There are flaws and duplications in the survey questions, and analysis of the results is not robust. For instance options for leaving SES include family/work and family/SES balance. This duplication of family reasons in two options makes it hard to identify the primary cause for a volunteer leaving. Further, 'other reasons' was the second most common response, after family/work balance, selected by exiting volunteers, but this was not acknowledged or analysed in the report. The link between survey findings and the areas identified for improvement by SES is also unclear. Collectively, these issues will impact SES's ability to gain a clear understanding of why its volunteers leave.

SES is in the process of implementing a number of initiatives such as developing Unit Controller and new volunteer induction manuals. However, these are ad hoc responses, and the link between these initiatives and findings from the exit surveys is unclear. There is no overarching strategy to identify, assess and take action on retention issues across SES. There is also no structure in place to monitor and report on SES's progress in implementing these retention improvement initiatives.

Recommendations

The Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service should:

5. evaluate volunteer support systems and processes
6. explore further opportunities to collaborate with each other.

The Country Fire Authority should:

7. develop exit surveys and associated management reports based on meaningful analysis as a way to better inform it about the reasons that volunteers leave
8. improve Brigade Operational Skills Profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability.

The Victoria State Emergency Service should:

9. improve ERAS-e profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability
 10. align ERAS-e profiles with its planning cycle.
-

Appendix A.

Audit Act 1994 section 16— submissions and comments

Introduction

In accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994*, a copy of this report was provided to the Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service.

The submissions and comments provided are not subject to audit nor the evidentiary standards required to reach an audit conclusion. Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of those comments rests solely with the agency head.

Responses were received as follows:

Country Fire Authority	36
Victoria State Emergency Service.....	39

RESPONSE provided by the Chairperson, Country Fire Authority

Patron: The Honourable Alex Chernov AC QC, Governor of Victoria

Office of the CEO
Headquarters
8 Lakeside Drive, Burwood East Vic 3151
Phone: 9262 8444 Fax: 9262 8322



23rd January 2014

Mr John Doyle
Auditor-General
Level 24, 35 Collins Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000



Dear Mr Doyle

MANAGING EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEERS

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the *Managing Emergency Services Volunteers Audit Report*.

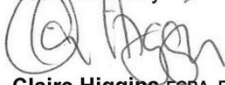
The Country Fire Authority recognises the critically important community service role volunteers perform within the State of Victoria.

I note that the recommendations provide opportunities to improve the management and support arrangements for volunteers. I would like to confirm that the report's seven (7) recommendations applicable to the Country Fire Authority are accepted.

The Country Fire Authority has already commenced addressing these recommendations. I am confident that the changes to be implemented will see continued improvement by the organisation in the management of our emergency services volunteers. A proposed action plan addressing each of the recommendations is attached at Attachment 1.

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to provide our response to your recommendations and also thank your team for their professional conduct in the manner in which the audit was undertaken.

Yours sincerely


Claire Higgins FCPA, FAICD
Chairperson
Country Fire Authority

Protecting lives and property

cfa.vic.gov.au

RESPONSE provided by the Chairperson, Country Fire Authority – continued

Attachment 1 – Proposed Action Plan – Managing Emergency Services		
Recommendation	Proposed CFA Action	Completion Date
<p>The Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve their central and regional oversight of volunteer workforce management, by strategically using the available information, such as volunteer demographic data, Brigade Operational Skills Profiles and ERAS-e profiles, and developing new information, such as risk assessment, to increase their awareness of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actual and required volunteer numbers • the gaps and risks around volunteer capability and capacity 2. Develop recruitment and retention strategies to guide these activities centrally, regionally and at the district, brigade and unit level, so that approaches are consistent with the organisations' strategic goals 3. Implement risk management processes within regions, districts, brigades and units to understand and manage the local risks associated with their volunteer workforces 5. Evaluate volunteer support systems and processes 6. Explore further opportunities to collaborate with each other. <p>The Country Fire Authority should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Develop exit surveys and associated management reports based on meaningful analysis as a way to better inform it about the reasons that volunteers leave 	<p>CFA will:-</p> <p>(1) Continue the development of the current CFA Volunteer Strategy that will set the strategic framework for volunteer workforce management and will draw on its data to increase the awareness of the required number of volunteers and to close gaps and risks around volunteer capability.</p> <p>(2) Finalise and implement the change from 8 to 5 Regions and the key service delivery role of the 20 districts of which the volunteers are the significant contributors.</p> <p>(3) Will finalise and implement the recommendations from the Review of the Brigade Operational Skills Project.</p> <p>CFA will:-</p> <p>Include these matters in the development of the CFA Volunteer Strategy</p> <p>CFA will:-</p> <p>Develop consistent risk management processes for adoption across the organisation and include this matter in its Corporate Risk Register.</p> <p>CFA will:-</p> <p>Implement this recommendation as part of Volunteer Support Programs.</p> <p>CFA will:-</p> <p>Designate a key Executive to collaborate with SES on this recommendation</p> <p>CFA will:-</p> <p>Implement the outcomes of the 2013 pilot exit survey project into 'business as usual'.</p>	<p>31/12/2014</p> <p>31/12/2014</p> <p>31/12/2014</p> <p>31/12/2014</p> <p>On-going</p> <p>30/06/2014</p>

RESPONSE provided by the Chairperson, Country Fire Authority – continued

<p>8. Improve Brigade Operational Skills Profiles to reflect volunteer activity and availability.</p>	<p>CFA will:- Finalise and implement the recommendations from the Review of the Brigade Operational Skills Project.</p>	<p>31/12/2014</p>
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RESPONSE provided by the Board Chair, Victoria State Emergency Service Authority



File Ref: DG/13/1069
Letter Code: CD/14/3782
Date: 16 January 2014

Mr John Doyle
Auditor-General
Victorian Auditor General's Office
Level 24, 35 Collins Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000



Dear Mr Doyle

Performance audit report - Managing Emergency Services Volunteers

Thank you for the Performance Audit Report *Managing Emergency Services Volunteers* and the invitation to provide a formal response.

SES accepts the recommendations in the report and will develop an action plan for their implementation during the first quarter of 2014.

Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) recognises the important role volunteers play in the delivery of emergency services in Victoria and since becoming a Statutory Authority in 2005, has endeavoured to provide the necessary support and assistance required by volunteers to carry out the work they do.

SES has invested in a number of improvements over the past eight years such as the employment of 13 volunteer support officers and the development of the ERAS-E system which has been designed to assist in the identification of resources required by SES, including the number and skill level of volunteers. These improvements were intended to build the capacity of SES to better understand the needs of volunteers and will now inform the development of an overarching recruitment and retention strategy. SES welcomes the recommendations in the report which articulates the issues that SES identified and is working to mitigate. The report will be used by SES as an important input to the building of our strategy.

In addition, over the next 12 months SES will continue to work on and improve ERAS-E, in consultation with volunteers, to assist the organisation with identifying and addressing the relevant issues and recommendations raised in the report.

SES is also piloting a project in our Central Region, in consultation with volunteers, which will contribute to the development of the overarching recruitment and retention strategy.

SES will continue to work collaboratively with the Country Fire Authority and other relevant emergency services to maintain a viable volunteer workforce for emergency services in Victoria.



RESPONSE Provided by the Board Chair, Victoria State Emergency Service – continued

SES has been working with the Fire Services Commissioner on the implementation of the reform program for emergency services, which focuses on the all-hazards, all-agencies approach to emergency management. This will ensure SES volunteers are supported by other emergency services' volunteers when responding to large scale events.

The all-hazards, all-agencies approach to emergency services and the implementation of a reform program will improve interoperability across the sector thus enabling volunteers from different agencies to respond to major events irrespective of the hazard, which increases the number of volunteers available to a Control Agency such as SES - when responding to floods and storms.

Yours sincerely



Claire Higgins
Board Chair
Victoria State Emergency Service Authority

cc: Mary Barry - Chief Executive Officer, SES

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