

**10<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Volunteering  
Melbourne, 2-4 June 2004**

**Plenary Presentation  
Volunteers in Emergency Management – A Clearer Focus**

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**Background**

- It is estimated that there are 500,000 volunteers involved in the Australian emergency management sector.
- They belong to a range of agencies that cover the entire spectrum of emergency management eg rural fire services, SES, Volunteer Coast Guard, Red Cross, Salvation Army, Anglicare, ADRA care, Volunteer ambulance groups (including St John), Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, the Volunteer Rescue Association, Surf Lifesaving and St Vincent de Paul.
- They provide services such as fire fighting, road rescue, search and rescue, marine rescue, first aid, catering, personal support, community recovery etc.

***Value Your Volunteers or Lose Them* – National Summit October 2001**

- As part of activities associated with the International Year of Volunteers, EMA hosted a very successful Summit which became a catalyst for further progress.
- Since the Summit and IYV, volunteer issues have become very prominent on the public agenda and have been brought to the attention of influential individuals within all levels of government.
- This has been due to many factors such as:
  - The carefully targeted distribution of the Summit Report
  - The formation of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF)
  - The media coverage of major events such as the bushfires in the Eastern states
  - The inclusion of the recommendations pertaining to volunteers in reports from Bushfire Inquiries and the Council of Australian Governments Review of Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements and Mitigation
  - Lobbying by peak industry bodies such as AFAC and the volunteers themselves.

- The development of the National Agenda which emanated from the previous Volunteering Australia Conference.

### **Recent Developments**

- Since the Summit, progress has been steady with much happening within agencies at the State/Territory and local levels. There have also been some significant developments at the national level.
- The focus of this presentation is to provide an overview of some of the significant national outcomes that have occurred and to examine some future developments.

#### **(a) Establishment of the AEMVF**

- Aims to foster communication between members and with government, and provide advocacy for volunteers within the sector
- Includes members from 17 key volunteer agencies
- Meets quarterly.

#### **(b) Charities Definition Inquiry**

- Federal government announced in early 2004 that it will amend the *Income Taxation Assessment Act 1997* to ensure that gifts of \$2 or more donated to organisations that coordinate emergency services will continue to be deductible for income tax purposes.
- Specific listing as a deductible gift recipient (DGR) will support these organisations by providing an incentive for people to donate.
- DGR listing will also mean access to GST concessions, providing further support for the organisations' fundraising activities.

#### **(c) Protection From Dismissal Legislation**

- The Workplace Relations Amendment (Protection for Emergency Management Volunteers) Bill 2003 was passed by Parliament on 26 June 2003.
- The Bill amends the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* to make it unlawful to dismiss an employee who is temporarily absent from work on voluntary emergency management duty.
- The protection applies to volunteer members of a recognised emergency management body, who are either requested by, or otherwise expected by, the body to attend an emergency or natural disaster.
- An absence would need to be reasonable in all the circumstances in order to be covered by the protection.

#### **(d) Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (CRC)**

- The Bushfire CRC was formed in July 2003 and involves around 30 partners.
- It aims to increase understanding of bushfires and how to control them

- The initial seven year research program is backed by cash and “in-kind” support of around \$100 million
- Some research projects will focus upon volunteers.

**(e) 2003 Australian Disaster Conference**

A number of papers and pre-conference workshops addressed volunteer issues.

Conference outcomes indicated that:

- Many emergency management agencies will be confronted with opportunities and challenges in maintaining and regenerating volunteer units.
- There is a need for recruitment campaigns targeting non-traditional sectors, including young people, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, and semi-retired and retired people.
- Opportunities to enable volunteers to develop personal skills able to be utilised in their paid career must be provided.
- There should be increased collaboration with other volunteer organisations to make joint submissions and representations on common issues.

**(f) Bushfire Inquiries**

- Following the recent disastrous bushfires, several official inquiries were conducted at the federal and state level.
- The most significant of these was undertaken by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)
- All of the inquiries included recommendations pertaining to volunteers which if implemented, will significantly improve conditions for emergency management volunteers.

**(g) COAG Report on Natural Disasters in Australia**

- In June 2001 COAG commissioned a review of arrangements for dealing with natural disasters.
- A High Level Group (HLG) of senior officials from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and the Australian Local Government Association was established to undertake the review.
- The HLG recommended that all levels of government agree to a comprehensive package of reform commitments including the following:  
**“support emergency management volunteers in tangible ways and remove obstacles to their involvement in community safety by addressing key priorities, namely legal protection, financial incentives, recognition and training needs.”**
- Specific details are included in Recommendation 58 of the Report
- While the implementation of the recommendation will be challenging, it represents a major step forward for emergency management volunteers.

**(h) National Emergency Services Memorial**

Construction of the memorial, which recognises the ultimate sacrifice made by both paid and volunteer emergency services personnel, is due for completion in early June 2004. The unique and state of the art memorial wall frieze was constructed in

Adelaide and has now been installed on site in Canberra near Lake Burley Griffin. A launch/dedication of the memorial is anticipated to take place during the period 15 – 24 June 2004

### **Barriers to Progress**

Considerable progress has been made and will continue to be made, particularly now that the COAG Recommendations have been agreed to in principle. However rapid progress has been affected by the following:

- The complexity of volunteer issues
- The large number of agencies involved in the sector
- Much of the responsibility for volunteers lies at the State/Territory level and some do not currently have the financial and human resources to implement the recommendations emanating from the Summit or the COAG report
- Some States/Territories are still debating the relevance of some of the recommendations to their jurisdiction
- Debate over whether recommendations should apply to non-government services and if so, where the resources should come from
- Length of time it took for the COAG Report to be endorsed.

### **The Way Forward**

The main catalyst for further progress is the COAG Review – especially recommendation 58 which focuses on:

- Legal protection;
- OH&S;
- Support for employers of EM volunteers;
- Providing volunteers with access to traineeships;
- Simplification of administration associated with the National Training Reform Agenda;
- Provision of assistance with the cost of public liability insurance; and
- Provision of concessions for EM volunteers.

EMA has commenced planning a second Summit for Emergency Management Volunteers

- To be held at the National Convention Centre – Canberra
- 6 - 7 April 2005
- Targeted at volunteer leaders and managers of volunteers
- No registration fees
- Participants must be nominated by their agency
- Part of the program will examine progress since first Summit
- Summit will be outcome focussed and will identify future direction
- Prime Minister, Governor-General and Attorney-General will be invited to participate.

### **Conclusion**

- Volunteers are fundamental to building a more resilient society.
- The volunteer emergency sector has an important role to play in the safety of Australian communities.

- Due to demands for the provision of more diverse and better services it will face increasing pressure.
- While significant progress is being made, there will need to be an improvement in support for emergency management volunteers from all levels of government, business and the community to ensure that volunteerism within the sector thrives.