



**Position Paper: Australian Government Compensation Scheme for Emergency Service  
Volunteers**

February 2020

# Position Paper: Australian Government Compensation Scheme for Emergency Service Volunteers

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## Summary

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies believe that future Australian Government emergency management policy must preserve the spirit of volunteering whilst also ensuring that volunteers do not suffer financial hardship because of their contribution to the community. This will require future emergency management policy to be well planned, cognisant of the varying contexts of volunteerism and have been developed through thorough consultation.

The recent 2019-20 summer of bushfires has focused the attention of the nation on the critical roles that volunteers play during emergencies and the significant volunteer workforce that is at the forefront of the response to such a national crisis.

Initiatives by the Australian Government to support the critical work of volunteers and the volunteer workforce are encouraged. Volunteers comprise a national workforce which is critical to saving lives and community wellbeing. However, the context of volunteerism varies significantly in different organisations and across States and Territories.

A key concern of Volunteering Australia is that future national volunteer policy response does not undermine the culture and the ethos of volunteering by introducing financial considerations that could be considered a wage or salary. At the same time volunteers should not be financially impacted because of their contribution to our communities.

Rather than setting a precedent and expectation of financial compensation for volunteers in future emergencies, Volunteering Australia recommends that the Australian Government and all State and Territory Governments use the lessons learned from the recent national crisis to improve policy settings relating to volunteers and support volunteer emergency service workforce planning.

This paper provides the view of the volunteering sector and incorporates feedback from targeted consultation with emergency Volunteer Involving Organisations, on how best to support emergency service volunteerism.

This Position Paper provides Guiding Principles and Recommendations to support the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments and other key policy and decision makers to achieve the best outcome for emergency service volunteers, Volunteer Involving Organisations and our communities.

We suggest that future policy development related to these issues by the Australian Government and where relevant, State and Territory Governments, are guided by the following principles:

*Guiding Principle 1: Maintain a clear conceptual understanding of volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Guiding Principle 2: Reimburse and cover out of pocket expenses of volunteers*

*Guiding Principle 3: Protect the health and safety of volunteers*

*Guiding Principle 4: Recognise the contribution of volunteers*

*Guiding Principle 5: Consult widely with the experts, including volunteers*

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<sup>1</sup> Volunteering Australia (2015) Definition of Volunteering,  
<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/>

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We recommend that the Australian Government and, where relevant, State and Territory Governments:

*Recommendation 1: Clarify the Australian Government's volunteer compensation position for future emergencies*

*Recommendation 2: Develop an emergency management workforce strategy.*

*Recommendation 3: Lead a recruitment drive for emergency volunteers*

*Recommendation 4: Ensure there are comprehensive mental health support services for emergency volunteers*

*Recommendation 5: Invest in the enabling infrastructure of the volunteering sector*

*Recommendation 6: Actively promote emergency volunteerism and corporate social responsibility (volunteer leave policies) to the private sector.*

*Recommendation 7: Develop and communicate a policy on Commonwealth welfare support compliance obligations for volunteers during disasters*

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## Introduction

This Position Paper has been developed by Volunteering Australia, in collaboration with State and Territory volunteering peak bodies, and with targeted consultation with emergency service volunteer organisations. It has been drafted in response to the Australian Government's volunteer emergency service compensation policy and aims to guide future policies.

In January, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies issued a statement in response to the Australian Government's compensation scheme.<sup>2</sup> Volunteering Australia further articulated its position through the media.<sup>3</sup>

The initial response from the volunteering sector acknowledged that there are various views on the compensation scheme from volunteer associations and volunteers in multiple jurisdictions, some of them conflicting. This paper focuses on how the emergency volunteering sector could be supported going forward, so that all volunteers, Volunteer Involving Organisations, peak bodies and governments are better prepared and resourced to maintain a sustainable and effective emergency volunteer workforce.

Given the complexity of the Australian emergency volunteer workforce, broad consultation is critical to understand the key issues and agree on best way forward.

The intention of this paper is to inform discussion and decision-making of:

- all governments participating in Council of Australian Governments (COAG), and other relevant intergovernmental forums
- any further relevant Australian Government volunteer compensation policy, funding decisions or workforce development
- the Black Summer Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, including volunteerism and workforce planning.

This paper includes guiding principles and recommendations for the benefit of leaders and decision-makers. The focus of this guidance is to ensure the best policy settings and arrangements are put into place before the next fire season or another national crisis takes place.

## Scope

The scope of this paper is specifically regarding compensation for emergency volunteering, and more generally about resourcing the emergency service volunteering workforce into the future.

The scope of this paper does not include emergency management techniques (such as hazard reduction) or debates about environmental factors. Volunteering Australia does, however, agree with the scientific

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<sup>2</sup> Volunteering Australia (2020), Volunteering Australia & State and Territory Peak Volunteering Bodies Response to Australian Government Compensation Scheme, <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/142/submissions-2020/18027/january-2020-volunteering-australia-state-and-territory-peak-volunteering-bodies-response-to-australian-government-compensation-scheme.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Pro Bono (2020) Peak Body Says Payments Could Undermine Australia's Volunteering Culture, <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2020/01/peak-body-says-payments-could-undermine-australias-volunteering-culture/>

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consensus that climate change exacerbates the frequency and intensity of natural disasters such as drought, fires, floods and cyclones.

This paper does not explore the issues related to Spontaneous Emergency Volunteering and the Management of Spontaneous Emergency Volunteers. Volunteering Australia is aware, however, that improvements are required to emergency management arrangements to better manage spontaneous emergency volunteers in some jurisdictions.

Note that many of the events and announcements included in this paper are ongoing and still developing. By the time of reading, some of these details may be out of date.

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### The 2019-2020 Bushfire Season

The 2019-20 bushfire season escalated from particularly severe natural disasters affecting some areas of Australia into an all-encompassing national crisis.

Tragically, at least 33 people have lost their lives as a result of the fires.<sup>4</sup> This death toll includes three volunteer firefighter responders (and more volunteers were injured).<sup>5</sup> The 2019-20 bushfires have burned over 10 million hectares.<sup>6</sup> Over 2,100 homes have been destroyed.<sup>7</sup> More than one billion animals are estimated to have been killed and it is likely some Australian animal species may soon become extinct.<sup>8</sup>

2019 was the hottest and driest year on record in Australia. Not only did record low levels of rain exacerbate drought across the Murray-Darling Basin system,<sup>9</sup> but the lack of water provided the context of extremely dangerous conditions leading into the bushfire season.<sup>10</sup>

The bushfires were:

*“25 times the size of Australia’s deadliest bushfires, the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria that directly killed 173 people, and are so large and intense that they create their own weather in which winds throw embers 30 kilometres or more ahead of the front and pyro-cumulus clouds produce dry lightning that ignites new fires.”<sup>11</sup>*

The bushfires included dramatic scenes and unprecedented mobilisation of Australian Government resources, for example sea evacuations using two navy ships at Mallacoota (Victoria) and the deployment of 3,000 Army reservists.<sup>12</sup> People in East Coast metropolitan centres were also directly affected with the most

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<sup>4</sup> The Guardian (2020) Counting the Cost of Australia’s Summer of Dread, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2020/feb/11/counting-the-cost-of-australias-summer-of-dread>

<sup>5</sup> Canberra Times (2020) Australia's 2019-20 bushfire season, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6574563/australias-2019-20-bushfire-season/>

<sup>6</sup> The Conversation (2020) With Costs Approaching \$100 billion, the fires are Australia’s Costliest Natural Disaster, <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433>

<sup>7</sup> Canberra Times (2020) Australia's 2019-20 bushfire season, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6574563/australias-2019-20-bushfire-season/>

<sup>8</sup> ABC (2020) NSW bushfires lead to deaths of over a billion animals and 'hundreds of billions' of insects, experts say, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-09/nsw-bushfires-kill-over-a-billion-animals-experts-say/11854836>

<sup>9</sup> ABC (2020) Murray-Darling Basin in 'most severe' two-to-three year drought conditions in 120 years of records, BOM says, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-19/most-severe-recorded-drought-across-the-murray-darling/11325216>

<sup>10</sup> The Conversation (2020) Weather bureau says hottest, driest year on record led to extreme bushfire season, <https://theconversation.com/weather-bureau-says-hottest-driest-year-on-record-led-to-extreme-bushfire-season-129447>

<sup>11</sup> The Conversation (2020) With Costs Approaching \$100 billion, the fires are Australia’s Costliest Natural Disaster, <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433>

<sup>12</sup> Canberra Times (2020) Australia's 2019-20 bushfire season, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6574563/australias-2019-20-bushfire-season/>

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hazardous air quality reported on record in several instances and smoke from the fires reaching New Zealand.<sup>13</sup>

Former New South Wales Fire and Rescue Commissioner Greg Mullins, notes that the 2019-20 bushfire disaster has brought us into a new era of emergency management. We are now faced with the challenge of fighting fires where multiple States and Territories have to respond all at once, instead of one-by-one.

“This is what we have been concerned about with climate change, is simultaneous fire seasons. They used to be progressive – so we [responders from multiple States and Territories] used to be able to share resources. That’s why you see the US and Canadian and New Zealand firefighters coming in because it’s really stretched the capabilities.”<sup>14</sup>

It is possible that the current extreme conditions of our natural environment will occur more regularly and our systems for managing them will have to adjust accordingly to a new normal.

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<sup>13</sup> Air Quality News (2020) The horror of the Australian bushfires and air pollution, <https://airqualitynews.com/2020/01/06/the-horror-of-the-australian-bush-fires-and-air-pollution/>

<sup>14</sup> ABC News (Australia) (2020), Firefighters Need More Funding and Resources to Fight Bushfires Claim Advocates, interview with Former New South Wales Fire and Rescue Commissioner Greg Mullins, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cJa2Lo7v74>

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### Overview of the Volunteer Compensation Scheme

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced compensation payments for New South Wales volunteer firefighters on 29 December 2019. Since then the scheme has been expanded to include other volunteer emergency responses from other States and Territories.

*“The early and prolonged nature of this fire season has made a call beyond what is typically made on our volunteers firefighters,” [Prime Minister] Morrison said. “While I know RFS volunteers don’t seek payment for their service, I don’t want to see volunteers or their families unable to pay bills, or struggle financially as a result of the selfless contribution they are making.”<sup>15</sup>*

The Australian Government is providing eligible volunteers with up to \$300 a day capped at a total of \$6000 as compensation for time off work to respond to the bushfires. Only volunteers who responded to the bushfires for over 10 days are eligible. The scheme only applies to employees from small-medium sized businesses and those that are self-employed. Compensation is for lost wages and income. This means people who volunteer on their days off will not receive any compensation as they have not lost wages and income. The payments are tax-free and not means tested.

Volunteer firefighters and emergency service volunteers employed by large business are not eligible. “We expect larger companies to provide their employees with 20 days of emergency services leave,” Prime Minister, Scott Morrison.<sup>16</sup>

In December 2019, the Australian Government implemented “contingency arrangements” until 19 January 2020 for emergency volunteers on welfare supports. These arrangements included the suspension of mutual obligation requirements for those volunteering as part of the emergency response.<sup>17</sup>

VOLUNTEER SECTORS ELIGIBLE FOR COMPENSATION	
Announcement Date	States and Territories and Eligible Sectors
28 December 2019	New South Wales volunteer firefighters <sup>18</sup>
29 December 2019	South Australia volunteer firefighters. <sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Liberal Party of Australia (2019) New Payments to Support NSW Volunteer Firefighters, <https://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2019/12/29/new-payments-support-nsw-volunteer-firefighters>

<sup>16</sup> ABC (2019) Scott Morrison Announces Volunteer Firefighter Compensation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

<sup>17</sup> Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business (2019), Exemptions for Volunteer Firies, <https://www.employment.gov.au/newsroom/exemptions-volunteer-firies>

<sup>18</sup> ABC (2019) Scott Morrison Announces Volunteer Firefighter Compensation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

<sup>19</sup> Australian Associated Press, (2019) Volunteer Firefighters In South Australia To Be Paid The Same As NSW Firies, <https://10daily.com.au/news/a191229khclci/volunteer-firefighters-in-south-australia-to-be-paid-the-same-as-nsw-firies-20191229>

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3 January 2020	Tasmania volunteer firefighters. <sup>20</sup>
7 January 2020	Queensland volunteer firefighters and SES volunteers <sup>21</sup>
8 January 2020	Australian Capital Territory Rural Fire Service and SES volunteers <sup>22</sup>
TBC	Victoria, Western Australia and Northern Territory

The Australian Government originally estimated that the cost of the scheme, which is uncapped, could reach \$50 million.<sup>23</sup> The scheme is administered by State and Territory governments which have made agreements with the Australian Government to opt into the scheme.

### Previous Volunteer Compensation Schemes

The current 2019-20 volunteer compensation scheme has prior precedent in Australia, but at a smaller scale.

Previous Prime Ministers, Paul Keating and John Howard, offered one-off payment schemes for volunteers, which were distributed by the federal government.<sup>24</sup>

- Sydney bushfires in 1994, more than 200 homes lost and four people killed: Paul Keating made disaster relief payment under the social security system (of up to \$2000 for a family and \$1000 for a single person), to compensate for property damage and loss of income, to also be available to volunteer firefighters.<sup>25</sup>
- 2001 after the Black Christmas Fires with more than 100 homes burnt: John Howard used the Social Security Act law to pay firefighters up to \$160 a day.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mirage News (2020) Financial assistance for our volunteer firefighters,

<https://www.miragenews.com/financial-assistance-for-our-volunteer-firefighters/>

<sup>21</sup> Canberra Times (2020) Personal compensation claims for up to \$6000 will be available,

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6570412/compensation-for-qld-fire-volunteers/>

<sup>22</sup> Canberra Times (2020) ACT rural firefighters to be compensated,

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6572176/act-volunteer-rural-firefighters-to-be-compensated-under-federal-scheme/>

<sup>23</sup> ABC (2019) Scott Morrison Announces Volunteer Firefighter Compensation,

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

<sup>24</sup> Canberra Times (2019) ACT government to seek advice on RFS compensation scheme,

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559728/act-government-to-seek-advice-on-rfs-compensation-scheme/>

<sup>25</sup> Keating, Paul (1994) Interview with the Prime Minister, The Hon. P.J. Keating M.P. Kirribilli House Sydney, Monday 10th January 1994, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9097>

<sup>26</sup> Daily Mail (2019) The legal loophole that could allow Scott Morrison to pay volunteer firefighters without changing the law – as the PM works on plan to compensate hard-up heroes,

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7830307/Scott-Morrison-pay-volunteer-firefighters-government-law.html>

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### Volunteering in Australia

The volunteering sector in Australia, in line with the 2015 definition developed by Volunteering Australia, defines volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”<sup>27</sup>

In 2014, 5.8 million people (31% of Australian adults) volunteered formally, contributing 743 million hours to the community over the previous year.<sup>28</sup> However, rates of formal volunteering in Australia have declined from 34% of adults in 2010, to 31% of adults in 2014.

The volunteering sector as a whole is supported by Volunteering Australia and the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies. The volunteering peak bodies provide advocacy, support sector development, promote volunteering and deliver other projects and services to advance volunteerism. Furthermore, the volunteering sector is supported by Volunteering Support Services across Australia – which specialise in place-based support such as information provision, training, local sector capacity-building and targeted support services for volunteers, managers of volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations.

While volunteers donate their time willingly, their contribution is not free. There are operational costs associated with delivering volunteering programs and this requires resource allocation, consideration of volunteering in policymaking, grants and funding. Effectively managing the volunteer workforce requires ongoing investment in sector capacity-building and the enabling infrastructure that connects people to volunteer roles.

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies support the development of the sector in many ways, including by maintaining *The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*. The Standards provide a sound framework for supporting the volunteering sector in Australia.<sup>29</sup>

Volunteering Australia and the volunteering peak bodies also help provide the infrastructure that supports volunteer attraction and recruitment. For example, the volunteering peak bodies support the VIKTOR platform which is a national volunteer recruitment system used by over 10,000 Volunteering Support Services and Volunteering Involving Organisations across Australia to recruit and manage volunteers. The platform powers multiple sites, including the State and Territory volunteering peak body websites, GoVolunteer, SEEK Volunteer and over 40 search widgets on Volunteering Support Service websites. These partnerships and networks attract over 2 million visits from potential volunteers each year.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Volunteering Australia (2015) Definition of Volunteering,

<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/>

<sup>28</sup> ABS (2017) 4159.0.55.004 - Discussion Paper: Information needs for Volunteering data, April 2017,

[https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4159.0.55.004Main+Features1April%202017?OpenDoc](https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4159.0.55.004Main+Features1April%202017?OpenDocument)

[ument](https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4159.0.55.004Main+Features1April%202017?OpenDocument). Note that there are different sources and data collection methods which results in different volunteering rates. While volunteering rates might vary depending on the source, the longer term trends of declining volunteering numbers, regardless of the source, are noteworthy.

<sup>29</sup> See Volunteering Australia (2015) The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement,

<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/national-standards-and-supporting-material>

<sup>30</sup> Volunteering Australia (2019) 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission,

<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/85/submissions-2019/17186/december-2019-2020-21-pre-budget-submission.pdf>

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## The Emergency Volunteer Workforce

### Emergency Volunteering

Volunteers are critical to Australia's emergency management systems and comprise a considerable proportion of the emergency management workforce.

A broad definition of "emergency volunteering" includes "any and all volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its duration or its particular organisational affiliation, or lack thereof".<sup>31</sup>

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014 General Social Survey estimated that 217,100 people (or 3.8% of all 15+ volunteers in Australia) had volunteered for emergency services in the previous 12 months, with each emergency service volunteer contributing an average of 42.5 hours per year.<sup>32</sup>

In another estimate, over 2014-15, there were 256,655 fire, ambulance and emergency service volunteers (and another 1,122 community first response ambulance volunteers) registered by emergency service organisations across Australia.<sup>33</sup>

*"This figure swells into the vicinity of 500,000 with the addition of volunteers with non-government community service organisations that provide vital support to communities when an emergency event occurs. This formal volunteer capacity sits alongside a significant, but far less visible, capacity to help people before, during and after disasters in wider Australian society through informal, emergent, and 'unaffiliated' (with [Emergency Management Organisations]) volunteering."*<sup>34</sup>

The 2019-20 volunteer compensation scheme and much of the attention of the public dialogue during the summer focused on firefighters and SES service volunteers. However, governments should remain aware that responses to emergencies such as bushfires involve volunteers from many other agencies and not-for-profit organisations beyond rural fire agencies and State Emergency Service organisations. Furthermore, the need for long shifts over prolonged periods in disaster response by volunteers is just one of many factors impacting the emergency volunteer workforce.

"Given Australia's geographic size, low population density and natural hazard risk profile; it is not feasible to provide adequate emergency preparedness, response, relief and recovery services to communities across the country without volunteers".<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> McLennan, B, Kruger, T (2019) Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism. RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC. Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>32</sup> Estimates of volunteer numbers (sometimes referred to as "members") have been highly variable. See Bill Calcutt (2019) Valuing Volunteers: Better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, p33.

<sup>33</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Report on Government Services 2016, pD9.

<sup>34</sup> McLennan, B and Kruger, T 2019, Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism (Environmental Scan Report No. 1), RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (Cooperative Research Centre), Melbourne, Australia. p10.

<sup>35</sup> Tarn Kruger and Blythe McLennan (YEAR) - Emergency volunteering 2030: views from local government managers Environmental Scan Report No. 2, p9.

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Special consideration needs to be given to the rural context in which much of the Australian emergency service volunteering takes place. Volunteers in rural areas of Australia are most often on the frontlines of fire emergencies. “In rural communities... across Australia, volunteers are the only source of many essential services. Quite simply, without volunteers, there would be no ambulance service, fire service or other critical emergency and support.”<sup>36</sup>

Emergency volunteerism has benefits beyond putting out fires and protecting lives and property. In addition to the contribution that volunteers provide in time and labour, there are “significant psychosocial benefits of emergency volunteering for volunteers and for communities affected by emergency events.”<sup>37</sup>

### Challenges for a Declining Volunteer Emergency Workforce

The broad trends of volunteering show a concerning decline of the volunteer emergency management workforce.<sup>38</sup> This is still the case even if some areas of Australia and individual emergency workforces (such as firefighters or ambulances) have a healthy and sustainable volunteering workforce.<sup>39</sup>

Delivery of emergency management services typically requires an ongoing, formal and professionalised volunteer workforce. Due to the unpredictable nature of natural disasters, organisations require large numbers of registered and trained volunteers, even if emergencies do not eventuate over one particular season. Importantly, volunteers must be resourced and trained well in advance of an actual emergency.

The ABS estimates a decline of the percentage of the total 18+ population volunteering for emergency services from 2.45% in 2010 to 1.23% in 2014 (2015).<sup>40</sup> The decline is both of the number of people engaged in long-term, formal volunteering, and a decline also in the average number of hours that people dedicate to this type of volunteering.<sup>41,42</sup>

*“Over the last decade a series of official reports have acknowledged the growing pressures on, and a general decline in, formal emergency service volunteering (as reflected in the ABS data). The 2011 National Volunteering Strategy observed that “the rate of natural disasters in Australia is predicted to increase in coming decades, and emergency management volunteering is facing a range of*

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<sup>36</sup> The Conversation (2018) Why Rural Australia is Facing a Volunteer Crisis, <https://theconversation.com/why-rural-australia-is-facing-a-volunteer-crisis-95937>

<sup>37</sup> Tarn Kruger and Blythe McLennan (2018) Emergency Volunteering 2030: Views From Local Government Managers Environmental Scan Report No. 2, p.11.

<sup>38</sup> The Guardian (2020) Australia's volunteer firefighting force declined 10% in past decade, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/29/australias-volunteer-firefighting-force-declined-10-in-past-decade>

<sup>39</sup> Perth Now (2019) St John Ambulance bucks trend on declining volunteers, <https://www.perthnow.com.au/news/health/st-john-ambulance-bucks-trend-on-declining-volunteers-ng-b881148433z>

<sup>40</sup> Bill Calcutt (2019) Valuing Volunteers: Better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, p33.

<sup>41</sup> McLennan, B and Kruger, T 2019, Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism (Environmental Scan Report No. 1), RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (Cooperative Research Centre), Melbourne, Australia. P11.

<sup>42</sup> The Guardian (2020) Australia's volunteer firefighting force declined 10% in past decade, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/29/australias-volunteer-firefighting-force-declined-10-in-past-decade>

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*challenges. Declining numbers of emergency management volunteers is an issue for many Australian communities. The commitment required of volunteers in time, training, periods away during emergencies and associated costs is great.”<sup>43</sup>*

There are a number of factors contributing to the decline of formal volunteering and challenges that require adaptation by volunteering communities. Some of the major drivers and challenges to overcome and adapt to include: “structural economic change that has increased competition between paid and voluntary work time; and demographic change, particularly an ageing population, greater participation of women in the workforce, urbanisation, and declining populations in some rural areas.”<sup>44</sup>

It should be noted that there are often surges in expressions of interest and recruitment of volunteers following natural disasters. This is the case for the current 2019-20 bushfire season.<sup>45</sup> The focus should be however, on the underlying medium-term trends, rather than volunteer rates from year to year, because of the need to have a prepared and sustainable workforce.

There are more factors which differ between regions and sectors which further complicate our understanding and ability to plan for our emergency volunteer workforce. Some of the considerations that were reported in our consultation include:

- Improved management and scheduling techniques which might be a reason for lower rates of formal, registered emergency volunteers in some jurisdictions and sectors, rather than a declining workforce.
- Some volunteers are registered with organisations as a gesture of notional support and may not be available to respond to emergencies. These volunteers would inflate volunteering rates but not add functionality to the workforce.

## The Compensation Scheme Effects on Emergency Volunteerism

The fact that some volunteer associations, volunteers and the public felt that compensation was necessary during the 2019-20 bushfire season points to some serious and fundamental structural workforce issues and environmental challenges that need to be addressed.

While the final quantum of compensation is still unknown, the early assumption by the Australian Government was that the total will approximate \$50 million.<sup>46</sup> It is also not known exactly what effects the volunteer compensation scheme will have into the future.

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<sup>43</sup> Estimates of volunteer numbers (sometimes referred to as “members”) have been highly variable. See Bill Calcutt (2019) Valuing Volunteers: Better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, p33.

<sup>44</sup> McLennan, B and Kruger, T 2019, Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism (Environmental Scan Report No. 1), RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (Cooperative Research Centre), Melbourne, Australia, p11.

<sup>45</sup> The Age (2019) 'Bullying culture' blamed as volunteer firefighter numbers drop across Australia, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/bullying-culture-blamed-as-volunteer-firefighter-numbers-drop-across-australia-20191229-p53nfo.html>

<sup>46</sup> ABC (2019) Scott Morrison announces compensation payments for New South Wales volunteer firefighters, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

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The assumption is that large companies, with greater capacity to provide employee leave than small-medium-sized businesses will provide appropriate leave to their employees. The Australian Government “expect[s] larger companies to provide their employees with 20 days of emergency services leave”. It is unknown how large business have responded and how commonplace emergency volunteering leave practices are. There is no mechanism of monitoring or enforcing such an aspiration.

### What are the Benefits of the Scheme?

The extreme extent of the 2019-20 bushfire season meant that the volunteer workforce was not in place to be able to respond in limited shift work. There was simply too much raging fire to control and firefighters and emergency responders required volunteers for prolonged periods. Given this situation where volunteers might face financial hardships because of being away from their livelihoods, the funding will likely assist many volunteers and their families.

The financial commitment by the Australian Government does recognise that volunteering is not “free” and does come at a cost, which should not be borne by the volunteer. This has helped to raise the profile of volunteerism and the extraordinary contribution of volunteers in Australia. Ultimately the commitment of financial support for affected volunteers sends a strong signal that their contribution is highly valued.

The administration of the scheme seems to ensure that volunteers are only compensated for what they would otherwise have earned at work. There are no assurances that volunteers who are compensated will recover all costs incurred during the course of their volunteer duties.

### What are the Downsides or Potential Challenges of the Scheme?

The ethos of volunteering – which is “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain,” – could be undermined or confused by this compensation scheme. Once payments or incentives are introduced, then it changes the very nature of volunteering. Beginning a precedent of compensation or the perception of a precedent, could be highly problematic.

Compensation schemes in one jurisdiction have implications for other jurisdictions, and for one generation to the next generation of volunteers.

There is a risk, particularly if the compensation is made during multiple disasters, that employers will be less inclined to provide long term paid leave to their employees who volunteer because of an expectation that the government might step in if the fire season is severe enough. There are varying emergency volunteering leave arrangements depending on the volunteer’s workplace, and compensation payments could upset longstanding norms which have been established in various regions.

Equity issues arise where some volunteers and some jurisdictions are being compensated and not others. “There are likely to be many volunteers, currently engaged away from work and no doubt losing income that will not be covered by a scheme that [originally only compensated New South Wales RFS volunteers]”.<sup>47</sup> This is not to argue the case that other forms of volunteering in response, relief and recovery should be incorporated into the scheme, but to acknowledge that introducing compensation for sector specific

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<sup>47</sup> Australian Emergency Law (2019) Commonwealth to pay NSW to reimburse firefighters, <https://emergencylaw.wordpress.com/2019/12/29/commonwealth-to-pay-rfs-to-reimburse-firefighters/>

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emergency responders does not fully reflect the collective effort and this creates small disparities amongst volunteering communities.

Having established the volunteer compensation policy, there are other costs absorbed by family members that are not necessarily associated with the primary income earner.

The funding used for this volunteer compensation scheme likely could have been used more efficiently if more planning and consultation been put into policy development earlier on. “I think the [the government] has gone down an expensive option,” said one firefighter reflecting on alternative ways to support volunteers.<sup>48</sup>

As noted by the Prime Minister, a key rationale for the 2019-20 volunteer compensation scheme was to minimise financial hardship on emergency volunteers and also their families. “I don’t want to see volunteers or their families unable to pay bills, or struggle financially as a result of the selfless contribution they are making”.<sup>49</sup>

Feedback for this submission from various emergency organisations across different jurisdictions noted that the financial impact on families for this prolonged form of volunteering goes beyond loss of income from employment. In many cases these costs are minimal and borne by volunteers as part of their contribution. However, in the recent more extreme summer these costs have likely had a far bigger impact on some families. These costs are not accounted for under the criteria of the current scheme.

A cohort of volunteers who responded to the 2019-20 bushfires (and other natural disasters) were in receipt of Commonwealth welfare supports. People on low incomes act as volunteers in their local communities despite facing their own disadvantages and challenges. These volunteers make a strong contribution to the emergency response and community service volunteer workforce through all the phases of response, relief, recovery and resilience building. Commonwealth welfare compliance requirements and actions were still being enforced during parts of the December / January period in the midst of the national crisis. If the intention is to reduce barriers to volunteering and reduce financial hardships for families of volunteers, then particular consideration of people on low incomes and with compliance obligations should be planned for in the future, with clear policies articulated and guidance provided to emergency organisations, peak bodies and volunteers well in advance.

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<sup>48</sup> Brisbane Times (2019) NSW volunteer firefighters to be paid in the new year, Victoria wary, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/federal/nsw-volunteer-firefighters-to-be-paid-in-the-new-year-victoria-wary-20191229-p53neb.html>

<sup>49</sup> Liberal Party of Australia (2019) New Payments to Support NSW Volunteer Firefighters, <https://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2019/12/29/new-payments-support-nsw-volunteer-firefighters>

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### Recommendations to guide future funding and policy

#### Guiding Principles

The emergency volunteering sector, encompassing half a million volunteers, and the broader volunteering sector beyond that, which spans multiple jurisdictions and has long planning time horizons, is diverse and complex. Moving on from the 2019-20 bushfire season, everything should be done to ensure that volunteer compensation is not necessary and remains an instrument of last resort. The following principles are intended to help guide decision-makers to navigate future challenges for emergency service volunteerism.

***Guiding Principle 1: Maintain a clear conceptual understanding of volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”***

We must ensure that national volunteer policy responses do not undermine the culture and the ethos of volunteering by introducing financial considerations that could be considered a wage or salary. The Australian Government and State and Territory governments, should continue to communicate and emphasise that the current volunteer compensation scheme was developed in extraordinary circumstances. The intention was not to begin to “pay” volunteers but to compensate those adversely affected by prolonged volunteering and it is not the intention to continue the compensation into future disaster periods.

***Guiding Principle 2: Reimburse and cover out of pocket expenses of volunteers***

Emergency service organisations should have the resources available (for training, equipment, clothing and so on), and the ability to manage the volunteer workforce, so that no volunteer requires financial compensation, beyond ordinary out-of-pocket expenses. Volunteer Involving Organisations should commit to the goal of “zero cost volunteering”.<sup>50</sup>

***Guiding Principle 3: Protect the health and safety of volunteers***

Excessively long shifts and prolonged periods of emergency response volunteering should be minimised, to the extent that is possible in the sometimes extreme realities of emergency contexts. Best-practice management practices and the latest technologies should be made available to support the volunteer workforce. Consideration should be made to support volunteers and their families with the heavy toll on mental health that emergency responses can take (including serious clinical issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).<sup>51</sup>

***Guiding Principle 4: Recognise the contribution of volunteers***

Volunteers have many different non-financial motivations for contributing their time. Volunteer recognition comprises one of the eight *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*. For organisations to be in line with the National Standards, “volunteer contribution, value and impact is understood, appreciated and acknowledged.”

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<sup>50</sup> Judy Esmond, (2016) Report on The Attraction, Support and Retention of Emergency Management Volunteers 2016, p.7.

<sup>51</sup> ABC News Australia (2019) Emergency workers 'too busy' to flag traumatic events and missing out on peer support, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-19/emergency-workers-mental-health-concerns/11425626>

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Initiatives such as awarding emergency service volunteers with the National Emergency Medal are welcome and encouraged.<sup>52</sup> Recognition of volunteering contributions should be ongoing (such as observing National Volunteer Week and other national and international days of recognition) even when volunteers are not required to respond to emergencies. This reflects the fact that emergency volunteers give so much of their time before responding to fires, for preparation, training and so on.

### ***Guiding Principle 5: Consult widely with the experts, including volunteers***

We need to be cognisant of varying contexts of volunteerism in different organisations and States and Territories, which have primary responsibility for responding to emergencies. Each jurisdiction has its own emergency management arrangements, levels of resourcing and natural environmental challenges, including fires, flooding and cyclones.

The experts in these regards are the volunteer rural firefighter, volunteer SES and other relevant volunteer organisations that specialise in recruiting, training, resourcing and mobilising emergency service volunteers, all in high-risk environments.

There needs to be more collective deliberation on volunteer compensation policies and how to sustain an emergency volunteer workforce. Consultation should be wide, given that all jurisdictions will be affected directly or indirectly, regardless of whether they have opted into the scheme.

Consultation should also be undertaken prior to public announcements, with organisations given the appropriate time to coordinate internally and to communicate policies (such as a volunteer compensation schemes) to their workforce and the public.

Volunteers have valid insights to contribute to the development of future policies and strategies. In line with the *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*, volunteers should be provided with opportunities to give their feedback on decision making that impacts them, their families and the community. Volunteers have a right to have their voices heard, based on their lived experience, and should be incorporated as a group into future government consultations.

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<sup>52</sup> Sydney Morning Herald (2020) Emergency Medal to Recognise Bushfire 'Service and Sacrifice', <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/emergency-medal-to-recognise-bushfire-service-and-sacrifice-20200126-p53use.html>

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### Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided for broad guidance to a wide audience, which if accepted, would need to be further developed.

#### ***Recommendation 1: Clarify the Australian Government's volunteer compensation position for future emergencies***

Volunteering Australia recommends that the Australian Government continues to communicate that the current compensation scheme is not an ongoing policy, once the 2019-20 bushfire season is over. This is necessary to ensure a clear blueprint for the future which will provide Volunteer Involving Organisations and the sector with more certainty and the ability to better plan for and support their workforce. This in turn will support the most efficient use of limited funds and resources.

If the key purposes of a compensation policy is to reduce financial barriers for volunteers and minimise the impact of prolonged volunteering on their families, then the duration of the eligibility requirements should be revisited. Many individuals and organisations have questioned how and why eligibility limit was determined to be 10 days before compensation becomes available.

#### ***Recommendation 2: Develop an emergency management workforce strategy***

The current volunteer model is not likely to be sustainable if Australia continues to experience emergencies on the scale seen on the East Coast in 2019-20. Given the medium-long term trends and challenges of sustaining an emergency volunteer workforce, the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs should lead the development of an emergency management workforce strategy, which includes particular consideration of volunteers. The strategy should consider the role of the Australian Government and how it can best support and complement the State and Territory governments to maintain a thriving workforce of volunteers. For an example, see the *Emergency Management Victoria Sector Workforce Strategy*.<sup>53</sup>

Workforce planning should consider the challenges of delivering emergency services in rural communities that are experiencing depopulation or aging populations. Future workforce strategies will also need to account for business employee volunteer leave practices and volunteer leave provisions for public servants.

#### ***Recommendation 3: Lead a recruitment drive for emergency volunteers***

To support the promotion of emergency volunteering and to increase volunteering rates, a video campaign could be developed which showcases the work that emergency volunteers perform, outlines the benefits of volunteering and encourages people to sign up before a disaster strikes.

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<sup>53</sup> Emergency Management Victoria (2019) *Emergency Management Sector Workforce Strategy*, <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/about-us/current-projects/emergency-management-sector-workforce-strategy>

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For examples of these kinds of campaigns see the emergency volunteer “Join, Learn, Be Ready”<sup>54</sup> campaign in Tasmania; the “Get Behind the Front Line” campaign in Western Australia<sup>55</sup> and also the Defence Jobs Australia<sup>56</sup> national defence recruitment video campaign.

Volunteering Australia and the seven volunteering peak bodies could play a supporting role, with the Australian Government, in developing these videos with emergency volunteering organisations.

Recruitment drives should cover the diversity of volunteer roles available in the emergency services, including numerous roles that also provide behind the scenes support during emergency responses, relief and recovery.

### ***Recommendation 4: Ensure there are comprehensive mental health support services for emergency volunteers***

Due to the damaging psychological toll that emergency services can take, volunteers in every Australian jurisdiction should have access to comprehensive mental health supports. The Australian Government should work with all States and Territories to ensure that there is widespread service provision for volunteers, particularly those who were involved in the 2019-20 bushfires.

### ***Recommendation 5: Invest in the enabling infrastructure of the volunteering sector***

There are various elements of supporting infrastructure that facilitate a thriving, efficient and safe volunteering sector, including online tools, inter-organisational networks, Volunteering Support Services and so on.

Volunteering Australia has made proposals to broadly and holistically strengthen the volunteering sector in the recent *Volunteering Australia 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission*.<sup>57</sup> Where emergency service volunteering organisations and emergency volunteers could benefit from investments for the volunteering sector in general, the government should explore funding Volunteering Australia’s proposals.

Some means of supporting volunteering through the broader volunteering infrastructure include investments in:

- GoVolunteer and other online recruitment platforms which facilitate Volunteer Involving Organisations and volunteers to connect and undertake formal volunteering opportunities. As the sector evolves and grows, maintenance and enhancements are required to ensure functionality is up to date with user expectations and user needs. These platforms support emergency volunteering and the volunteering sector as a whole.

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<sup>54</sup> Tasmanian Government (2020) Join, Learn, Be Ready: Become an Emergency Volunteer, <http://www.emergencyvolunteers.tas.gov.au/>

<sup>55</sup> Mirage News (2019) ‘Get Behind Frontline’ to help our emergency services, <https://www.miragenews.com/get-behind-frontline-to-help-our-emergency-services/>

<sup>56</sup> Australian Defence Force Recruiting YouTube Channel (2020) Defence Jobs Australia, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChjK\\_qDUvhJEgt1S0NGO2w](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChjK_qDUvhJEgt1S0NGO2w)

<sup>57</sup> Volunteering Australia (2019) Volunteering Australia 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission, <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/85/submissions-2019/17186/december-2019-2020-21-pre-budget-submission.pdf>

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- Digital apps and software that helps recruit and manage volunteer workforces. Like other online platforms, investments in the best technology have flow on benefits for emergency Volunteer Involving Organisations.

Administrative processes can create barriers for volunteers and increase workloads for managers of volunteers. The nature of the recent crisis resulted in many volunteer responders moving between jurisdictions under different regulatory regimes. While administration and regulations are in place for the protection of the whole community (for example through police checks and working with children checks), any ways of streamlining or supporting Volunteer Involving Organisations to reduce the workload would be beneficial, particularly to facilitate people volunteering interstate.

### ***Recommendation 6: Actively promote emergency volunteerism and corporate social responsibility (volunteer leave policies) to the private sector***

Volunteers come from all sectors, including the public sector and the not-for-profit sector. Various businesses have played an important role in supporting communities through the bushfires. However, there are no mechanisms or legal supports for workers to be granted volunteer leave. In some areas, employers will grant paid leave for their employees to volunteer as part of longstanding norms and business practices, based on the understanding of their workers' need to respond to emergencies. But this is not the case in every workplace. A widespread business culture of allowing leave for emergency volunteerism should be encouraged and enabled.

Action should be taken by the Australian and State and Territory governments and their representatives to promote more consistent and widespread leave practices to employers. Such a soft approach would help to entrench norms of providing volunteer leave, particularly in times of emergencies, that would help reduce barriers to volunteers.

Consistent messaging could be supported by the development of best practice guides by departments and government agencies (including the Fair Work Commission).

### ***Recommendation 7: Develop and communicate a policy on Commonwealth welfare support compliance obligations for volunteers during disasters***

To better activate and support the emergency volunteer workforce, policies should be developed relating to mutual obligation requirements and other compliance matters for volunteers during emergencies. Greater planning and coordination well in advance of emergencies will likely reduce administrative barriers for volunteers and reduce financial hardship on volunteers and their families.

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### Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Ms Adrienne Picone  
Chief Executive Officer

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### Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



### About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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### Glossary

<b>COAG</b>	The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia.
<b>Formal volunteering</b>	Time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place within organisations (including institutions and agencies) in a structured way.
<b>Informal volunteering</b>	Time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place outside the context of a formal organisation. This includes assisting people in the community, excluding one's own family members. For example, looking after children, property or pets; providing home or personal assistance; or giving someone professional advice.
<b>The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement</b>	The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement contain benchmarks specifically designed to help organisations attract, manage, recognise and retain volunteers, and to manage risk and safety with respect to volunteers.
<b>Spontaneous emergency volunteers</b>	People who seek or are invited to contribute their assistance before, during and/or after an emergency, and who are not affiliated with recognised volunteer agencies, and may or may not have relevant training, skills or experience.
<b>VIOs</b>	Volunteer Involving Organisations are organisations that utilise volunteers as part of their workforce.
<b>VSSs</b>	Volunteer support services (also known as volunteer resource centres or volunteer support organisations) provide place-based volunteer support services to volunteers and VIOs in their locality.

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